

In The Spot Light

Muriel Berns(tein) Spreads the Word About Precast



Being the only woman in a room full of men never flustered Muriel Bernstein. As a working woman joining the precast industry in the 1970s it was simply par for the course.

She admits that, in the beginning her peers may have been skeptical of her ability to make it in a man's business, but her infallible charm and bold confidence quickly won her a place in the precast concrete history books.

Bernstein, known to most as Muriel Berns because her boss felt Bernstein was "too Jewish", never dreamed of joining the ranks of the precast industry, or any industry for that matter. She wasn't born into a concrete family or married into one. She was simply a happily married young woman in 1963 living in Westbury New York whose kids had started school and needed something to do for a few hours a day.

Looking for a part time job, she found an ad in the local paper seeking an assistant with advertising experience to work at a precast concrete company called PRECO that supplied exposed aggregate retarders, release agents, coatings, sealers and a range of accessories for precast production. She had no idea what precast concrete was, but she had spent several years prior to marriage pursuing a degree in advertising at City College in Manhattan, so she responded.

At first George Wormser, one of the then-owners of Preco, dismissed Bernstein because she was overqualified for

the job. Unwilling to be put off for such a ridiculous reason, Berns didn't accept his reasons and harassed him every day until he finally gave in. She got the job in late 1963, and began working three hours a day as an assistant making \$1.10 an hour.

"I didn't care about the money I just wanted to work," Berns says. And as her kids grew older and spent more time out of the house she spent more time at Preco, learning the precast concrete business and earning the respect of her bosses.

Berns was happy with the part-time job making a little extra income, but in 1970 her job experience took on a much more important role in her life than she could have predicted. Her husband of more than a decade passed away at the age of 42, and Berns was left with two children, who were 10 and 12, and a new and uncertain future ahead of her.

Fortunately Wormser, the same man who had tried to brush her off seven years before, saw her potential as a valuable asset to the company and gave her a new direction and a chance at a career. After her husband's funeral Wormser told Bernstein he wanted her to travel and give speeches to contractors about the advantages of precast concrete.

"I said 'I can't give speeches,'" Berns



Muriel Berns and boyfriend, Len Tomchon

laughs. "But he said 'yes you can!' And he was right."

A Mission to Improve Quality

She agreed to give it a shot, and every couple of weeks, her brother stayed overnight with her children while she traveled the country giving speeches to architects and engineers.

"I became known as the expert on exposed aggregate precast concrete," she marvels.

Embracing her new role, Berns made it her mission to do away with poorly detailed and executed exposed concrete through her high energy presentations to members of the building industry.

"Smooth concrete is the chief culprit in earning concrete a bad name with the general public," she says. Through her speeches and demonstrations, she showed industry professionals how much more attractive concrete can be when it is allowed to expose its fine and

coarse aggregates.

Back in those days, any woman in the precast business was an anomaly, and one who was an expert on the subject with the eloquence and presence to captivate an audience was extraordinary.

"If you are a woman in a man's business and you really know your stuff you have it made," she says.

When her children were old enough for sleep-away camp, Berns extended her trips, traveling for weeks at a time, opening branches of the company in England, Scandinavia and Norway, and giving speeches in New Zealand and Australia. She became a frequent lecturer at 30 schools of architecture in the United States and regularly presented to groups of engineers and architects at the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the American Concrete Institute (ACI) and the Construction Specification Institute (CSI).

Preco loved having her on staff because she was so unique and memora-

ble and "it proved the company had an open mind about women in business," Berns says.

When the company opened a concrete retarder division she was promoted to one of its first full-time employees and later she was made chairman of committees and eventually won a seat on Preco's board of directors.

Preco continued to grow and expand during those years. Eventually it was bought by Fosroc Construction Chemical Group of Fosroc Minsep Ltd. then later by Cleveland-based Master Builders Inc.

Bernstein stayed with the business until the second purchase in 1998 at which point she opted to retire. She stayed on as a consultant for a few years, giving occasional speeches and attending association meetings, and later took a position as director of marketing for Grossu Group an engineering company, where she worked for another four years.

Eventually she retired from the busi-

ness all together in 2000, but even now she hardly takes a break from work. A self-styled volunteer superwoman, Berns works with several charitable groups and associations, which keeps her busy several days a week. She helps the USO host its annual Fleet Week in New York City and when she's not working with homesick sailors, she's the vice president of the Eleanor Roosevelt Democratic Club, she's the trustee of the Murray Hill Neighborhood Association and she is on Community Board Five in Manhattan, which works with the business community in Times Square. And just to be sure she doesn't lose her working woman status, once a week she is the receptionist for the 17th Precinct police department.

But, says Berns, she still has a little free time and would love to get back in the business. So if anyone is in need of a part-time vivacious precast expert/receptionist, they should give her a call.

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