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# A View *from* the Top

When Emily Bittenbender founded Bittenbender Construction, LP, she had one overarching goal: to cause a paradigm shift in Philly's construction industry. Here's how she built that dream into a rock-solid, skyscraping reality.

**IF THERE'S ONE THING PHILLY KNOWS** about Emily Bittenbender, it's that she's going to get the job done, bar none. This year's Trailblazer Award recipient, Bittenbender has been exceeding expectations and bursting through construction industry norms for more than 20 years. Today, she heads one of Philly's most sought-after Construction Management Firms, Bittenbender Construction, whose impressive client list includes Comcast, Verizon and PECO Exelon.

Bittenbender made her professional debut—and, effectively, her first business overhaul—in August 1996 at just 29 years old. At the time, Philly's bond rating (a governmental credit score) had fallen to junk level, so the city was unable to borrow any money. Ed Rendell, then mayor,

hired Bittenbender to create a brand-new city agency to take on the challenge of managing and allocating \$484 million worth of emergency (PICA) funds to firefighters, healthcare, human services, police and prisons before the funds went extinct.

So, as the youngest commissioner on Rendell's executive staff, Bittenbender set out to build her first edifice, albeit a figurative one: The Capital Program Office.

Bittenbender attacked the challenge in the same way she's made a name for herself in Philly construction—by breaking norms. "Rendell allowed me to come in and bring a private sector approach in these projects," Bittenbender says. "It was a paradigm shift



**Building Bridges:** Emily Bittenbender is removing barriers and raising the bar for women in construction in Philadelphia.



## “My goal was to mentor and bring in as many women as I possibly could to create a pathway and a pipeline for women to become leaders in construction.” —Emily Bittenbender

to show people how you can think differently in a government structure—shake it up.”

She—and her handpicked crew of young professional hires from the private sector—quickly became regarded as a force to be reckoned with. “We were a team, and we kicked ass,” she says. “We were very well known in the city because we were so different.”

Bittenbender had a front-row seat under Rendell, learning how to manage money, manage contractors and architects, and understand and leverage politics. The list goes on. She leaned on that experience when she was hired in January 2000 as the Vice President of Design & Construction of the National Constitution Center (NCC) on Independence Mall.

The team she assembled to build the NCC made a strong impression on her as it felt reflective of the Constitution itself. “We had ‘We the people’ on the front of our building, and I made very sure that all people were represented in building that project,” she says. “It was a very diverse workforce and contractors. It was the pinnacle of my career at that time to build something so special and so significant with such an amazing team.”

After the NCC project, Bittenbender, a Harley rider at the time, considered starting her own line of clothing for women motorcycle riders. But a very good friend encouraged her to pursue construction—or, as Bittenbender puts, it, “He told me that was a really stupid idea.”

In 2003, Bittenbender decided to risk everything. She sold her house, liquidated her 401K, took a \$100,000 loan from that friend and started Bittenbender Construction. Her first client? Comcast.

To clinch this and other big-name projects, she used the same philosophy she had under Rendell; namely, a paradigm shift. She promised transparency and trust between client and contractor, which was hard to come by in construction at the time. “There was always a perception that contractors were burying hidden costs,” she says. Many companies would have given the client one number as an estimate, avoiding precise cost breakdowns so that they could inflate their own revenue.

But Bittenbender wanted to do things differently. Even before she started the company, she had its tagline: Changing the Way You Think About

Construction. “We said, ‘We’ll sit at the table with you and show you all the numbers,’” she says. “We’re going to be much more transparent—we want to be part of your team.”

In addition to elevated transparency, Bittenbender had big plans to revolutionize construction company personnel. “My goal was to mentor and bring in as many women as I possibly could to create a pathway and a pipeline for women to become leaders in construction,” she says. Today, Bittenbender Construction has six executives; five of them are women.

Bittenbender explains that the construction industry in Philadelphia was always male dominated until she arrived on the scene, explaining that there is more diversity at the subcontractor and material supplier level. The General Building Contractors Association (GBCA), founded in 1724, is one of the country’s oldest trade organizations and includes regional general contractors, subcontractors, material suppliers and construction service members. Bittenbender was the first woman-owned and woman-founded general contractor to be included as a peer in the GBCA.

She went on to become chairman of the board of GBCA and has paved the way for more women to follow in her footsteps through the Leadership Preparation Program, whose enrollees are majority women.

Even as she paved her way into the industry, Bittenbender says it wasn’t always a welcoming environment. “They were doing us a favor by giving me a seat at the table,” she says. But she was steadfast and confident—and had the impressive projects to show for it.

Fast forward 20 years, those same GBCA members are her staunchest supporters and some of her best friends in the industry. Ultimately, she has not only caused a shift in the way the industry views women leaders, she’s also influenced the future of construction in Philadelphia. She works with several business owners who have chosen women as their successors, and she mentors those women. “As our industry has become more diverse, women have been placed in more leadership roles and a few are preparing to be the future leaders and owners of the construction companies in our city,” she says.

Ultimately, all that Bittenbender has achieved in the past 20 years reflects lessons of grit and determination instilled in her by her father, a builder by hobby, and especially reflects the importance of teamwork and character building. “During the process, you watch all these young people grow and evolve and come into their own,” she says. “So, as you’re building your buildings, you’re also building people.”



### LUMINARY LEADER

# Game Changer

As a successful basketball referee, Natasha Camy is breaking down gender barriers on the court and helping support the next generation of game officials with her organization Referee Ready.

**EARLY IN HER CAREER AS A BASKETBALL REFEREE**, Natasha Camy experienced a heartbreaking loss when her mentor passed away from breast cancer. To navigate her grief, she kept her pastor’s advice close to her heart. “It’s not about the year she was born or the year she passed,” she recalls her pastor saying. “It’s about the *dash*.”

The *dash* is life, or more specifically, how you live your life. That mantra is now a motivating principle in Camy’s personal and professional life.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Camy grew up both playing and being a fan of basketball. During college, she refereed local games, supported by her maternal grandmother, who also refereed. She decided to pursue it professionally, despite having few examples of women referees at elite levels.

Camy is now an accomplished referee, officiating NCAA Division I women’s basketball, but career ascension isn’t all she strives for. In 2023, she founded Referee Ready Development Academy, which breaks down the industry’s barriers to entry to help established and aspiring referees find lasting success.

Before Referee Ready, there wasn’t a streamlined one-stop-shop to learn what it takes to be a full-time official. So Camy built a center where people could get the training and certifications they need to officiate as well as financial advice, mental health resources and networking opportunities.

According to Camy, networking can aid success because it builds community, a backbone that’s been integral to her life. Her industry peers, friends and family, like her wife and daughter, have all supported and enriched her career—and that’s helped make her a beacon of what’s possible for other women, especially Black women, in basketball. “Players and coaches can connect with me,” Camy explains. “I resemble what’s on the floor and the sidelines.”

But representation is only one piece of the puzzle, according to Camy. Financial constraints can also pose a barrier, which is why the Referee Ready Foundation, Referee Ready’s non-profit component, aims to provide scholarships for individuals to receive referee training and certifications. It’s also why, as Camy looks towards the future of her career and the sport, she strives to continue making a difference—to focus on what she can do with her *dash*.

What does that look like? For Camy, it means expanding her family and blossoming in her own career, while also paving the path for others. She invests in the Cape Town Tigers, a South African basketball team, and hopes to do the same if Philly gets a WNBA team. She says, “I always want to find new ways to invest in basketball.”

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