

THE FIX

A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

Guests: Kristina McMillan, Crew Collaborative

Run Time: 20 minutes

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

00:00:06 Katherine Lehtinen

Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community. a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

00:00:46 Katherine Lehtinen

Doug, our guest today is a mom of the burps, a mover and a shaker, and a crew collaborator.

00:00:55 Dough Buchan

You know, the only thing I can say, Katherine, if I gave you the following words, you tell me what they mean, okay? Let's go with construction, tenacity, creativity, high-end jewelry, and super mom. What would you say? I'd say it's our guest

00:01:11 Katherine Lehtinen

today. It's our guest today by God. Well, thank you Kristina McMillan, founder of the Crew Collaborative, for joining us today. Hey, thanks for having me. That was my

00:01:22 Kristina McMillan

best intro I have ever had. That was awesome. Yes, you did it Doug. It's one of our

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favorite parts. So, so can you tell us and give us a little bit of background on in your career path and initially attracted you to the construction industry?

00:01:37 Kristina McMillan

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Ooh, that's a loaded question. Yeah, I didn't, I never, if you'd asked me, you know, at the age of whatever, a long time ago, a million years ago, if I would be doing this, the answer would be no. Although in high school I did think I was gonna go into construction. The reason I love construction is kind of interesting because I took a welding class in high school, you know, back in the old days when we had shop classes still in schools and I took welding class and it was the only class that got an A in. Aside from that I was a C - average student and nobody was really paying attention to me. And then senior year I took my ACT and I got a 32 and it was everyone was like holy Hannah she's actually pretty smart. And so at that point I got pushed into college. I'm a first-generation American so didn't really have you know parents who necessarily understood the education system to push me any differently. I went to Iowa State and got a journalism degree and like Doug mentioned I spent some

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time doing some creative things like I was a concert producer and then I was a high-end jewelry designer but then I fell in love with a guy from construction and we all know when you fall in love with a guy it just screws everything up and throws everything up. And so I fell in love with not just him but I fell in love with his people and I started showing up at job sites and getting to know the people and the idea of having something that you built throughout the day and that you positively impacted something in a way that was going to stay that way forever felt a little bit more rewarding long-term than jewelry. At that point I was doing high-end jewelry design and I literally left a successful jewelry practice. I was a partner there in a really swanky neighborhood here in Minneapolis and jumped full bore into construction and I have not ever looked back and it's been 15 years now so I just love the industry I love the people I love the things that we accomplish for our communities

00:03:40 Kristina McMillan
and yeah that's in a

00:03:41 Katherine Lehtinen

nutshell awesome I love it all so Crew Collaborative is doing some really groundbreaking work in a challenging the status quo of the construction industry can you share a bit about that what motivated you to kind of start this nonprofit and what your vision is for the future outside of your husband who

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got you into the construction area. Spoiler alert, ex-husband, but I slept with the industry, not the guy, okay?

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00:04:16 Kristina McMillan

So, Crew Collaborative was started about four years ago. Most of us met at Con Expo in Vegas in 2020, right when COVID was starting. And there's about 11 of us that I would say were the founders, although they've slapped me with the official name tag of founder, probably because I'm the loudest and bossiest. But we saw a lot of problems within the industry, and it was a group of females, and we saw a lot of problems that we wanted to solve because we all love this industry, and we feel like it was so hard to convince other women to come join us and to come kind of like explore options within the industry, right? And at first we were a women in construction organization. CREW actually stands for Construction Retreat Empowering Women. But then we changed it once we all kind of came along the same idea that we really love the men that we work with. And we've all felt supported and mentored and just appreciated by the men within within our workspace and within the construction community. And

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so we made it more of a everybody in construction and that's where the word collaborative comes from. And so we just really wanted to focus on some of the things that we wanted to change within the industry, namely just the way that we're perceived in general and the misnomers around how much money you can make, the type of people that join construction, you know, we're not all a bunch of losers who, you know, couldn't get good grades in high school there's some really smart people and that then that if you don't want to go to college you should go into construction well there's a lot of careers within construction that require an education and so we we do a lot of work around going into high schools and speaking directly to high school students we will have virtual presentations these are called our classroom talks and we have young people within the industry talk to young people who are making their life decisions right and basically say like hey I'm 24 years old and I was just able to

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pay for my first house with cash because I make such good money in construction. You know and that's just really high level kind of the stuff we're focused on. We also do trainings called our ambassador program where we teach people within the industry already how to better recruit out into their communities and how to develop a voice or their personal brand or whatever so that they feel more comfortable because we do find that the biggest roadblock to recruiting is not being comfortable with the overall message, right? Self-confidence. So we try to give them that. Yeah, that's

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great and probably an outline in which to go and execute and it probably would help too that it's all the same type of message so that we really do work on

00:06:51 Dough Buchan

changing that narrative. Yep. Let's talk about small businesses for a second. So small businesses, I mean they run the United States for goodness sakes, right? A lot of people out there, they make their own schedules, they make their own goals and they achieve those. So based on your journey you know what type of information or you know support do you give that a small business individuals

00:07:16 Kristina McMillan

out there to help them? Well ironically my full-time job is consulting with small businesses within construction so this is a space I'm very passionate about and I think one of the number one things that Crew does and one of the things that I do with my clients is really focus on that aspect of leadership and how to best lead a team, whether it's three people, whether it's yourself and your family, and whether it's 50, 100 people, or however big your company gets, but how to best establish yourself as someone who knows things but doesn't know everything. Because I do think that sometimes in construction, there's egos involved, right? And that's gonna be in any sort of industry, but specifically in construction, I think that there needs to be some work done on letting go of some of that ego and taking in help. Because so many small business owners start a business with the right intentions, to do something better than they've seen it done by someone else. And they push so hard that they

00:08:17 Kristina McMillan

end up running into a brick wall over and over and over again. And they don't ask for help. And they don't acknowledge that they don't have it in hand. They don't have it all handled. They don't have all the answers until it's too late. And at that point, they might have so many problems and they're insurmountable. And so we try to, as crew, and with me and the work that I'm doing with my consulting company, really get in front of that and just help them acknowledge, OK, I don't have to know everything. It's OK to take new tools into my toolbox. And we do it on a job site, right? Why not do it when you're running a business? So that's what we're doing with small businesses. And I mean, you're right. Small businesses really do encompass our entire country, right? It's what we're built on and we don't do anything without those small businesses. Can you talk to us a little bit

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about the Crew Ambassador Program and what impact you've seen from that program so far and how does it contribute to changing perceptions about careers in the trades?

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00:09:22 Kristina McMillan

So the Ambassador Program is one of our two programs that have really launched, I would say, the biggest. The first one is the one I was just talking about, which was Classroom Talks. And Ambassadors kind of feeds into Classroom Talks, right? So what we do is, so I run the trainings for now, and it's a four -week program. We talk for about an hour every week, and I think we're pushing it up after four years on 200 Ambassadors. We just wrapped our fifth round of trainings last week. And what we do in those is we kind of take a unique shift, and I think it kind of throws people off when they're in the ambassador trainings because they think there's going to be a typical leadership training, right? And it's not. I make them talk about their feelings. We do personality tests. We talk about how we as an industry show up and how we're being influencers in our daily lives. Because even if you are, you know, Joe whatever, who's a carpenter, right? And maybe you interact with like four people per

00:10:27 Kristina McMillan

day that are outside of the industry. Those four people are taking their impression of the industry from what you, Joe the carpenter, are presenting to them, right? So you might love your job and you might be happy and feel really valued, but if you're not reflecting that outward into your community and showing people the type of opportunities that you've been given as a result of that, then you're not necessarily doing your industry justice and you're not helping with our recruitment problem. And so we're trying to empower everybody to be like, okay, you are an influencer, whether you're influencing one person or 1 million people. Everybody hears the word influencer and they think of the Kardashians, which is just bullshit, right? Because they are not the only ones out there influencing people. Absolutely. We all are. So that's what we try to teach in Ambassadors.

00:11:14 Dough Buchan

I love it. Can you tell us a little bit about what Crew Collaborative maybe has upcoming for projects or incentives?

00:11:25 Kristina McMillan

Well, we have a plan to take over the world. Of course, all domination. We are definitely in a transition period right now. We are in the process of going from a non -profit startup to a legitimate big girl, big boy pants non -profit with some real impact. And so, we've recently hired a management company to help us with the day -to -day. We have some killer board members. And so, we have our two programs which we've launched so far. We have a third program which is called Framework, which is literally such a behemoth of a program that it's going to take us a while to get it off the ground. The seed money for that program was provided by Case Equipment, or CNH Industrial,

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depending and how you want to refer to them, but so they've been great partners. We also have Caterpillar and Toro as sponsors of our main programs, but the plan with Framework is really to get into every single high school. We see our biggest roadblock right now, now when we go out to high schools, we've always kind of

00:12:28 Kristina McMillan

had this chip on our shoulder, like, oh, the high schools don't want to talk about careers and construction, and that's actually just not true. They do want to talk about careers and construction, they just don't know how to do it, because the four -year universities are going in with programs and

00:12:41 Dough Buchan
and

00:12:41 Kristina McMillan

recruitment planning, and they're showing up. And our industry does not have a program where we're all aligned and just showing up and saying, here's all of the things that you can do in construction. Like a college would come and say, here's all the things you can do with a degree. And so that's our plan with Framework is to put together mentorship programs, put together career paths, put together marketing materials, and get into every single high school within the US. Wow.

00:13:09 Katherine Lehtinen

Yeah, I love it. I mean, I think that that's a great place to start in making sure that everyone has that type of curriculum to be able to follow from a guidance counselor, even if they don't have someone there that really understands, at least they have the tools that they can utilize to be able to help can make that connection for sure. Exactly, yeah. You know, looking ahead, how do you envision the role of organizations like Crew Collaborative evolving to continue to supporting and promoting education, fostering innovation, and inspiring that next generation of essential pros.

00:13:42 Kristina McMillan

I would like to have a call to action around that particular idea. There's a lot of organizations doing things that sort of align with what Crew is doing, right? There's too many of us, and what we are looking to do in the future is sort of to have like a co -op. As we build out framework, we're not competing with these other organizations. We want to come alongside and take the good things that they're doing and the good things that we're doing and have a larger impact than we're currently able to have. And so that would be kind of like the long -term vision of what we would like to do and how we would like to work with other organizations. We just think that there's no point in all of us doing redundant work when we could all kind of join forces and do work that helps everybody. We

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have a big enough problem, it's a crisis at this point, and we're not looking at it like a crisis. It's not being treated like one, we're all just talking about it, so.

00:14:41 Katherine Lehtinen

Yeah, absolutely. It makes sense. And I know we've been fortunate to sit on our side and to talk to a lot of initiatives like Crew Collaborative, and we always walk away saying, oh, if this group would talk to this group, and if this one could use best practices. There really is, and there's a lot of amazing work being done, and I think fostering all that together would really drive even more of an impact back.

00:15:06 Kristina McMillan

Yeah, for sure. Yeah, we're not trying to take away from any of those organizations. In the same vein, we have a lot of people who are like, Oh, have you talked to so -and -so? And there's just not enough hours in the day.

00:15:14 Katherine Lehtinen

Yeah.

00:15:17 Katherine Lehtinen

Agreed, agreed. Yeah. On a more personal note, how do your hobbies and interests outside of work, like gardening, biking, painting, influence your creative thinking and leadership style and construction? Because it all plays together.

00:15:30 Kristina McMillan

Yeah, it does. You know, I've had a pretty tumultuous life. We'll say it's been very, I've had some really dark years. And so I'm in a point in my life where I have a deep appreciation for balance and a deep appreciation for quiet moments and just times where I don't let myself be stressed out. So we do a lot of art in our house. I'm actually in the art room. My office to set up. My kids and I will sit down and paint together. I think that having creative outlets is really great and I will say also just in the same in the vein of construction right I've always been blown away but by how much creativity exists within our industry as well. It's another misnomer that I think is placed on construction is that we're not very like creative people but but I've met some plumbers and some carpenters and some welders and people that do just amazing things in their free time or even like as an additional income with creativity. And so to me, it's like having that creative outlet as a reminder of how

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good it is to work with your hands and how important it is to stay active. Another stigma of our industry is that we're all out of shape and that's not true either.

00:16:52 Katherine Lehtinen

So, yeah. Yeah, and it's even more so we had another conversation where you would almost say the opposite that those that are at a sedentary stance and at a desk all day are out of shape and trades are more in shape than they are just because of the sheer movement that we difference between the two for sure. Yeah, for sure. So what would be your legacy and vision for when you're ready to leave crew and move on to the next thing? What is your goal and vision for this group? What do you hope that they achieve?

00:17:26 Kristina McMillan

Well, I don't think I'm ever gonna leave Crew. I tried at some point to take a step back. It didn't work. It's like my third child at this point. There's a few of us that really feel like Crew is, it's a labor of love. Yep. I hope my legacy with Crew is some of these bigger ideas. All the programs have been my ideas. I will never claim to be a detail person, but when it comes to kind of taking a high -level look at how can we solve a problem, no matter how big that idea might be, I'll just kind of drop it. I'm that person. I'm just kind of like, hey, what about this? And I drop it in someone's lab, and I'm like, anyways, well, I'll see you guys later.

00:18:08 Kristina McMillan

And so I think that that that'll be my legacy is these, you know, classroom talks and framework and ambassador program, like Those things are things that I've had a big hand in. But also the storytelling around the organization, around the industry. I'm our partnerships chair right now, and so I'm going out there and fundraising for our organization. So if you want to give us money, we would love to take it. So I have really developed an ability to tell the story of the organization and why we're doing what we're doing and why it's important. And so that's what I think my legacy will be really within this organization is the ability to just be passionate about the people that I'm representing.

00:18:52 Katherine Lehtinen

Yeah, I love it. Well, yes, we have guests on and especially the nonprofits. We either look for ways to donate product or help support. So we would love the ability to help support the initiative of what you're doing. I wasn't just talking about you guys. I was talking about all the listeners.

00:19:07 Dough Buchan

Oh, the listeners. I know. Your subliminal message got through to us.

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00:19:12 Katherine Lehtinen

It got out. And we talk about that often, too, that, you know, even though we do this as a brand and as a manufacturer, the goal here is that everyone is participating in this and other brands are participating, too, because it's all of us combined that are going to make an impact in our industry. And as much as a resident, as a citizen, as an employer and in a manufacturer, we all need the trades to continue to thrive and to bring awareness to them so that we do have longevity in this industry for many, many years to come. 100%. Yeah. Well, thank you, Kristina, so much for joining us today. It was such a pleasure and we look forward to continuing talking in partnership with you over the years. Awesome. Well, thanks for having me.