

WTC 'Alone in the Forest' with Michael Allen

[00:00:00] **Christi Powell:** Hey everyone, this is Christi Powell with Women Talk Construction. I'm here with Angela Gardner and Michael Allen and we are really excited about today. Hey Angela, Michael, how are you doing today? Doing great. Good, good. Thank you for being on with us today, Michael. We really appreciate it. Angela, how about you?

You doing good? I am. Yay. It's a Friday for us. When the listeners are listening and it may not be a Friday, but today is a Friday as we're recording. So it's a happy day. Fridays are always happy days for me anyway. It's a day to catch up and then start getting your mind set for resting, right? Speaking of resting, um, one of the reasons that Michael and I, Michael and I just got to meet today, which is very cool, but we wanted to talk a little bit about connections and how important they are.

Um, some of you listeners who've been listening know that Angela and I met on LinkedIn and some of you don't, but, uh, connections are really important in our life, not only for us personally, but professionally. And Michael and Angela have had a good connection for quite a while from what I understand. So I'm going to let Angela talk a little bit about that connection and Thank you all for being here and listening to us.

[00:01:17] **Angela Gardner:** Yeah. Thank you, Christi, for that. I know it's so cool how you meet people either on social media and we live in the same town or how Michael and I met. And actually it was because I, um, went to, uh, an entrepreneurial webinar or, you know, something like that back in like 10 years ago. I think Michael, maybe longer, maybe longer.

And Ray Lattimore actually mentioned, Hey, you need to meet this friend of mine. Yeah. because y'all share a similar interest in architecture. And so, cause my dad's an architect and I worked for his firm for, you know, 18 years. So we got connected and I just, Michael is a superstar in my mind. I mean, when I read his bio, but let me just say connections are so important because Michael and I have been friends.

We will be friends forever. And. He and I get it, you know, and you too, Christi, building relationships, right, Michael? They're so important.

[00:02:17] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. They're the foundation of our success.

[00:02:19] **Michael Allen:** Yeah. We, uh, when you build a relationship that, you know, instantly when you meet a person that if this is going to be what type you got kind of, um, groups, you put relationships in associate friends, uh, this is only going to be for this one time we meet.

So you instantly know who's going to be. Um, sort of, like Angela said, a forever connection and friends. So, yes. Yeah,

[00:02:45] **Angela Gardner:** well,

[00:02:48] **Christi Powell:** I can't think of a better person than Angela to have a connection with forever. And once I get to know you, Michael, I'm sure I'll feel the same way. Oh, you

[00:02:56] **Angela Gardner:** will after I introduce him because you know, we don't share everything about the person, but I want to go on ahead and share with y'all and introduce Michael to you.

I want to start this off because I know how important it is. Because my dad kept telling me. It is so hard to get your architectural degree at Clemson and just just get that Michael didn't just get his architectural degree. He also was a football player and to play a sport and complete and get an architectural degree.

Is, I mean, it's huge. And now that I understand that better, wow. Wow. He has had 21 years of success in architectural design and, um, of course, business development, which we just talked about in project management. And the thing that I, that, that really like when we met and he talked about that, I really saw in him that he does, that's like.

Going to help him to just keep soaring is he cares about people he's passionate about helping others and he's done that all throughout his career throughout his, you know, days at Clemson, it, he looks for opportunities to help others and he does that within his own company, MOA, architecture, and. I'm honored to be his friend.

So I wanted to get started. And, you know, Michael, if you want to tell us any more about yourself before we start diving into the questions, did I leave anything out that you feel is like really important to share?

[00:04:29] **Michael Allen:** Uh, you know, what I like to share about to people is just that I am a Southern boy, right?

Born and raised in Conway, South Carolina. Um, and I, I think it's an important part of who I am and. An important part of my foundation of being just, um, just that, that humble. Foundation that I've learned from family growing up. So

[00:04:54] **Angela Gardner:** nice. Yeah, well, I'm going to dive into the 1st question. So can you share with us an example of a recent architectural project that you've worked on that incorporated sustainable design principles and how it made a positive impact in the community or environment?

Because I know that you're all about that.

[00:05:12] **Michael Allen:** Yeah, so we are currently working on 1. so we, um, we are doing a renovation project for South Carolina state. And it is, it's an older building, but what thing about sustainable design is. It's sort of easier to do a sustainable project when it's from scratch and from a green piece of land and you're designing it.

But the important part is we create our team to be able to take a, an existing building and turn this into a sustainable project, which means we're doing some. New landscaping to the site, we're making sure that the water runoff from the site is being handled correctly. The materials that we're using on the building.

We are making sure that they're sustainable materials that are on the building. Just, you know, just in case things happen, don't want paint to wash off and destroy or contaminate bodies of water nearby. And so what what it does for the project. Also, it it does for the community. It just brightens the community because of a building that's been sitting and not renovated.

Um, the parking lot had, you know, grass growing in and it's cracked, uh. Overgrown shrubbery, and our job was to work with the university to improve that look and it gives it gives the community something that, you know, it probably was an eyesore or ended up being a building that you just pass by and not even pay attention to.

But the way that we're working with the university and redesigning this building is to give it a new. Um, a new appeal to that site. Um, and with the new landscaping and building materials, it creates that new look and sort of, I would like to say it creates a new landmark for the community.

[00:07:07] **Angela Gardner:** I love it.

Yeah.

[00:07:07] **Christi Powell:** Nice. Yeah. I love that too.

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[00:07:48] **Christi Powell:** And it's so important to, we, you know, we talk about the generations that are coming behind us and I don't know how old you are, Michael, that I am in the boomer, barely a boomer and barely only six months, but you know, I still have to say it, I'm a boomer that matters to them a lot. Right. Everything that you just talked about.

It didn't matter. I hate to say this. It didn't matter to my generation very much, right? We had our heads down. We were working really hard. We were all workaholics. That's all we cared about. And we were not focusing on the things that really mattered when it came to sustainable building. So, I love that we've taken this shift and that you're doing things that are taking a shift to make that a lot better.

Have you noticed that with the rapid pace of technology and advancements and innovations, how do you ensure that your architectural designs remain relevant and adaptable for future changes? Is there something in particular that you can do to make that happen?

[00:08:48] **Michael Allen:** Well, it really just follow your client. So, you can't, we can only push design so far.

You only have a few, I would say, if you look at architectural magazines and awards and all those things, they're what we call starchitects out there that design these buildings that are just, they push the limit of design and some great buildings, but you only have a few of those. So our job is to really just listen to our clients.

And so our clients are evolving with what they need. And so if, if we are listening to our clients and designing towards what their needs are, we're current. It's always current based off of our clients needs at that time, because they know if we're doing a bank, they know the technologies and the things that they're looking for.

If we're doing a science building. Yes, we keep up with the trends and, um, and education design. Right. But our particular client knows those particular, uh, technologies and pieces of that design that are needed. So we really, we, we stay, we stay up to date by, you know, going to conferences and reading the magazines and knowing those things, but we don't put it in the design until our client really needs those.

[00:10:07] **Christi Powell:** That makes sense. So it sounds to me like everybody's responsible for their own part. Right. Each team needs to be up to date. Like you're up to date with all the things that your team does. Right. And you're making sure that you're on top of it. And then you've got the, the, uh, audio and video people that are coming in and they're up to date on all of their things.

And that might make the next generations that are thinking about entering the AEC industry. It might make it a little less intimidating for them to realize that they don't have to know everything, right? They can stay on their lane and it's not so intimidating that you have to know about the innovation or the new software and, you know, with audio and video with, uh, communication in the home with, you know, the Alexis in every room kind of thing.

There's just so many teams that are within that building, and they are all responsible for their own innovation and progression in that. So that's, it's great to hear. And I'm sure people that are considering our industry probably would be less intimidated by that as well.

[00:11:09] **Michael Allen:** Yeah. It's all about the team.

You got to put together the right team for the particular project. So you know, you know what the type of project it is. And you know, the value of the different teammates that you can bring onto the team, you bring the right teammates, you'll, you'll have a successful project.

[00:11:26] **Christi Powell:** And back to connections too, right?

I'm sure that each one of the teams in a project like that are very well connected. Even if it's just for a season, you're connecting with all of those folks that have their own teams that are making that project come to life. Yep. Awesome. Thank you for sharing that.

[00:11:42] **Angela Gardner:** Yeah. And cost is always a factor. I mean, that's of course.

So I liked when Michael said, you know, you got to look at the client because y'all are so far away from that construction project, you know, that you have to factor in is this going to feel costly, right? Yep. So I'm going to dive into the next question, which I think is really cool. Is a CEO of MOA architecture, what strategies and approaches do you employ to foster, you know, to have a, an awesome culture of innovation within your team?

Like, how do you cultivate that and grow it?

[00:12:18] **Michael Allen:** Well, the hard part when you start a company yourself. Is relinquishing things, you know, it's delegation, it's delegation that so when you, when you create a team, you got to be flexible and I'm learning to still learning, being flexible enough to allow new ideas, things that I might not have thought about, I might read all the time, I might research a lot, but in order to allow growth and, and see, you know, have the, um, The culture of the company create a culture that is free to expand ideas that can make the company grow and expand.

You got to relinquish some of that, those ideas, let, let, let those ideas flow so that. That we can hear it because it might not be, it might, it may not be something that the company that we actually take on, but it is allowing the culture that says, Hey, if you see something that I may have missed, it might, it may work for us.

It may be something that we need to incorporate in our processes or how we talk to clients. And as a

[00:13:29] **Christi Powell:** leader, I think that's the best way we can retain people. That's some, some of the questions that we've had recently, right? Trust the people that you've hired to be able to do what they do and lead them well, right?

Lead them well enough to listen to what they have to say, even though it's not your plan, but it's, it's really empowering to folks to be able to feel like they can

do their job the way they want to, and they're willing to express what they feel would be better for the job. And I do love that. Um, and speaking of leadership, You are a Liberty Fellow, right?

Liberty Fellowship Fellow of the Aspen Global Leadership Network. How has that experience influenced your leadership style and the way you approach architecture and design?

[00:14:12] **Michael Allen:** Well, because they, the entire institute is filled with multicultural, international, different types of industry leaders. I get, I get to interact with them consistently.

So, um, just to hear what they do on a day to day, just to understand the different industry they might be in. It's just hearing the challenges that they may face and how they maneuver or how they grow and how they expand and just to hear the stories. It allows me to take some ideas and be able to have somebody that I can ping and ask questions just to it may be something as well.

One of my fellows from India, for instance, might have something that a company. Issue or insight that I can just call on. I can reach out to to hear how to adjust something that I have going on with MOA and be able to put that in to play for making our company a little better or running a little smoother or getting through some obstacle that may have happened.

[00:15:29] **Christi Powell:** You don't have to start from scratch, right? Why are we all reinventing the wheel when we start a business, when we have, when we have resources and diverse people and diverse with diverse backgrounds and diverse experiences and expertise, and it just doesn't make any sense to me. I'm like, I'm one of these people.

That's always thinking of the best way to do something in the quickest way. Right. And the quickest and best way is find somebody that's smarter than you and have a conversation with them. Or they've already

[00:15:55] **Angela Gardner:** done it.

[00:15:56] **Christi Powell:** Right. Yeah. And, and, and, and find a way to support them and utilize their resources instead of trying to recreate the wheel and say, I did it myself.

And

[00:16:06] **Michael Allen:** that's the business and that's the business side of it. The design side of it, it can come, it can come the same way that they might not, they might not be in the design world. But I, I do like to team and get ideas from people that are not in the design world, because those are the users of the facilities or the building designing.

So, to understand from a user perspective helps me and getting those perspectives.

[00:16:34] **Christi Powell:** Yeah, for sure. And I just want to share this. I do too. I want to share this really quickly. That is so true. When I took this role as a WBE director for 84 Lumber, I didn't really know a lot about being a women business enterprise.

And you know how I learned? I went and found a whole lot of W's and M's in business and in construction. And I sat down with them and had a cup of coffee and said, Hey, what do you need? What are your challenges? What are the things that are working really well for you? And that's how we developed our department, was based on the end user, the people that we were going to be able to help and support and grow their businesses.

So, um, and I didn't plan that, but it worked out really well.

[00:17:16] **Michael Allen:** Yes.

[00:17:22] **Angela Gardner:** Hill Electric was founded in 1954 in Anderson, South Carolina. Rooted in the upstate of South Carolina, Hill Electric has garnered a reputation as the region's most innovative industrial electrical contractor, providing machinery installations, And facility power to countless companies in the area committed to quality performance, valued service and responsive schedule management.

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So I'm going to ask the last question, but and it's kind of going to even circle back around to how we started it off, but. Can you tell us, Michael, the importance of networking and building relationships in architecture, you know, in that industry and how it has contributed to the success of your architectural firm?

Because that, you know, there are some, maybe some architectural students that just need to hear how that, how that would work for them.

[00:18:33] **Michael Allen:** So, one of my mentors. Told me that you can be a great designer. You can, you can design pretty buildings on paper. You can, um, be a great technical person and know how to take that design and put the notes nuts and bolts and wood to metal and know how these connections go, but you can't do any of that.

If you can't win work, if you don't know how to talk to people, if you don't know how to build relationships, so you don't have anything to design or or detail until you know how to meet. And so the importance is, is just that it's being able to go out. And be comfortable with talking to people and creating new relationships, because there are a certain amount of projects that are going to come for certain clients.

So you have a great relationship with this one client and that's who you're comfortable with. But that client may only have, you know, one project, so you need to be able to expand and have that same comfort level with multiple different types of people, different industries, um, from different areas to be able to continue your business because you can't, the well will run dry on certain projects because that's just, that's, that's just the way it is, construction, um, and, and, um, Depending on what type of firm that you work with, it might, you know, pigeonhole you into 1 type of architecture.

And so if you don't want to do that, you got to expand outside of that type and meet those types of people go to advance, go to. Corporate events and go to state events, go to all kinds of things to be able to meet new people at the coffee shop. Talk to people. Never know who you are standing in line beside because that person may be a connector.

Um, and that's, that's what you need. People need to know you and they, and you need to be able to be comfortable enough to create a relationship. Because that's anybody. Yeah, that's that's how that's how you get work. I mean, it might not be the decision maker that you create a relationship with, but that person connects you to that person.

So it's it's you can't you can't design without

[00:20:53] **Christi Powell:** it. No. Well, and no connections, a bad connection. That's correct.

[00:20:58] **Angela Gardner:** No connection. I was going to ask Michael, when was this, when did this mentor tell you this? Like how, what stage in your career? And

[00:21:07] **Michael Allen:** yeah, this was literally right before I launched MOA because it was important for me to hear.

Because he made sure that I understood he knew other architects that broke off on their own, but they were kind of shell people. They were recluse. They wouldn't, they couldn't, they couldn't talk. They didn't like to go to events. They didn't like to go to the ball and shake hands because they were just great designers.

They liked the paper and design didn't want to meet people, but they couldn't get. Yeah, I'm off the ground because they had that 1 or 2 products at the beginning of the career of their firm, and it couldn't keep going because of

[00:21:48] **Angela Gardner:** networking. How many mentors have you had or do you have just so they can the audience can hear because I know you've had probably.

Several. Well,

[00:21:58] **Michael Allen:** I would say this. I, I, I got what I call a my personal board of directors.

[00:22:03] **Angela Gardner:** Okay. Yes,

[00:22:06] **Christi Powell:** I love it. And they all do different

[00:22:08] **Michael Allen:** things, right? All in different industries. And most of them are business owners of different types from tech to Uh, clothing. So it's, it's just a, this a plethora of ideas and mindsets that, uh, allow me to ask questions when needed.

[00:22:27] **Angela Gardner:** There we have it. Yes.

[00:22:29] **Christi Powell:** Thank you so much for all of your wisdom today, Michael. Um, if you were to talk to a room full of architecture students today and tell them one thing that really helped you other than the amazing things that you've shared with us today, if there's one small thing that they can do for themselves to be successful.

What would that be?

[00:22:48] **Michael Allen:** Never stop learning. Love it. Because, because architecture is just that. It's going to always evolve. Um, architecture is going to always be needed because we're humans and we need a place. We need place. To live. We need environment and we, we're, we're responsible for creating those environments and spaces.

You

[00:23:07] **Christi Powell:** guys are cool. That's all I got to say. We are.

[00:23:10] **Angela Gardner:** We are. We are.

[00:23:11] **Christi Powell:** Very cool. So share with our audience how we can, how they can get ahold of you if they want to use you for a project or they just want to meet with you or maybe just have a coffee and have that one on one connection, whatever that happens to be.

I still want to have a coffee with you too because we live in the same city. State. But, um, if you would let our audience know just how to get ahold of you and how to reach out if they can.

[00:23:35] **Angela Gardner:** Oh, and by the way, he has a book, too. We didn't talk about that. A children's book, right? That's correct. That's correct.

So I'm

[00:23:43] **Christi Powell:** so excited. Please talk about that.

[00:23:45] **Michael Allen:** So I, uh, so the firm now has launched a, a non profit that mentors young architects, um, from elementary to first year college, um, called Architects, A R K Techs. And so we... We'll put the link

[00:24:02] **Angela Gardner:** on the website. So

[00:24:05] **Michael Allen:** we, we, we mentor, basically this is a resource. And so creating that organization, I create, I did a book, a children's book to get young kids inspired about architecture.

So it's a book based off of my life that, um, showed my curiosity as a kid and tinkering and is really architectural base. Um, I kind of got a little, the reason I created the foundation and wrote the book was I was a little frustrated with the STEM program, not ever. Really include an architecture, they do everything, they invite everybody, but they don't invite architects or, um, and most of it, I'm going to buy my own experience.

And so I wanted to create an organization that really focuses on mentoring and the education of what it is to be an architect. And so the book is that this young boy curious. He is, he does everything an architect does, but he doesn't even know he's an architect. It's the problem solving, it's the designing, it's the sketching, all that happens at, with this young boy.

And, um, the first book out of a series, I'm going to do a series of five total. Nice. Um, the first, first book is out, um, it's on Amazon and it's called Alone in the Forest. Um, and, uh,

[00:25:19] **Christi Powell:** It feels like a forest

[00:25:20] **Michael Allen:** too, doesn't it? And, uh, so, uh, it's, it's a, it's a. It's been taken very well. Great book based off my life.

So, so most of it is fiction, uh, but it's based off of some real life stuff that I've done as a young child. So, um, it's a great book for young people. If you really want to get a kid interested in architecture, uh, this is a way to get started. Part of a way to get started.

[00:25:47] **Christi Powell:** Thank you for that. Thank you for your service.

We We really love supporting other business leaders that are giving back to the community and you're doing that in a big way. And we can't, we can't thank you enough for that. Our industry needs it really badly, right? I think we've been, I think we've been neglected for a little while because things just, it wasn't important enough.

You know, it wasn't like in the forefront, but. Really appreciate what you're doing and I can't wait to get that book. I'm gonna read it and then I'm gonna make . I'm gonna make my teenager read it, so you never know. Thank you. She might be interested in architecture. , you're right. Yes. How do you know You don't know It's right until you see it.

Right. Thank you for being on. Please tell us again how we get ahold of you.
I'm

[00:26:27] **Michael Allen:** on, I'm on LinkedIn. Uh, so Michael Allen on LinkedIn. You can reach go my company website, MOA. ARC. com and all our social media is on that website. You can get a link to connect on there. So everything can get to me from the website.

[00:26:46] **Christi Powell:** Thank you so much for sharing and we'll make sure and get that book out in front of people that we know so that they can also support architecture as well. Thank you so much for being on today. You're welcome.

[00:26:58] **Angela Gardner:** Thank you. Thank you.

[00:27:04] **Christi Powell:** Well, that's all for this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the Women Talk Construction podcast with your hosts, Christi Powell and Angela Gardner. See you next time.