

WTC 'Hire Great Contractors' with Christine Yerkes

[00:00:00] **Christi Powell:** Hey podcast listeners, this is Christi Powell with Women Talk Construction. I'm here with Angela and Christine Yerkes,

and she is joining us today to talk about a lot of things. But one of the things we're going to talk about first thing this morning, as we continue to have more conversations helping women. Want to enter our industry. What are the challenges we're finding with this new infrastructure bill and all the construction?

Well, I'm going to start by saying I have to go to a Columbia meeting and leave an hour early because of the construction on 26 going towards Columbia, South Carolina. How about you, Angela? What, what kind of joys or aggravations are you getting out of, uh, the infrastructure bill and all the construction with bridges and roads?

[00:00:53] **Angela Gardner:** Well, you know It's a lot, but you know what, I'm going to go to the reason why we need it. It's because every time I drive down the street, I see, I, I don't, I barely even see a South Carolina driver's tag now. It's always an out of state tag and, and that's causing a lot of this too. I wonder if Christine is seeing that in where she lives as well.

[00:01:15] **Christine Yerkes:** We're in Florida, home of the snowbird, or not home of the snowbird. But anyway, they're all flooding down, especially with current weather. So it seems like our state bird is trafficking and we get all sorts of people mixing on the roads and it's dangerous. Oh yeah. But we need it desperately. This state's growing so fast.

[00:01:38] **Christi Powell:** Y'all are growing. It feels like everybody is,

[00:01:40] **Angela Gardner:** doesn't it? The Southeast is just booming. Southeast.

[00:01:44] **Christine Yerkes:** It is. Yeah. A lot of people from California even coming this way. Yes.

[00:01:48] **Christi Powell:** Yes. Yeah. For sure. Yeah. Well, Christine, tell us, I mean, I know how amazing you are and I've gotten to meet you in person and we had a really fun dinner.

I want to say that was in DC. Were we in DC? Yes, we were. Yes, we were. That was fun. And anyway, while we're in the Uber, I got to hear just a little bit of Christine's story at dinner and in the Uber and thought that the whole world needed to hear your story. So give the audience a little, just a small background of, you know, where, what you're doing and who you are and why you have a passion for helping women in our industry.

[00:02:24] **Christine Yerkes:** Oh, goodness, late eighties, graduated, uh, went to the Navy because I ran out of money in college. Like a lot of people, they got me a scholarship. So I became a Navy civil engineer or officer and stayed active duty until my second daughter and then went reserves, had a great time and became eventually a civilian with the government and stayed in the reserves, retired from the reserves after 23 years, which was great.

A great deal. If anybody wants to try that, it's fun. And then worked as a civilian for a long time and just. So I decided to take the contractor exam just to see if I could pass it, passed it, and thought, Oh, now I've got to do something with it, opened a company for consulting in 2014 and quit my government job, took an early retirement after a really almost fatal accident and re prioritized my life in 15 and started working as a general contractor for government contracts.

[00:03:23] **Christi Powell:** Nice and you're very good at it. I've seen you. We're having fun. That leads me to 1 of my 1st questions. You worked on the Trinity River floodway. What were some of the most significant challenges? You and your team face during the demolition of those historical bridges in that area? And how did you overcome them?

Especially considering the proximity? to an operating elevated commuter train.

[00:03:49] **Christine Yerkes:** Well, that was tough. I can't even imagine. That hardest part was getting on site because if you work for the Army Corps of Engineers, you know that the paperwork's very, very intense. Um, luckily we're pretty good at it. Cause I used to be on the other side, um, working, I shouldn't say other side.

I used to be a government employee, so I knew the pay board, but oh my goodness, how hard it is as a contractor. I need to apologize to my contractors, but anyway, um, it is, isn't it? Yeah. But once you're on site, it was an

interesting, it was in the flood plain, so there was levies on either side, downtown Dallas, which unfortunately isn't one of the safer places to work.

So being in the floodway, you're out of view of. Um, and anybody that might be able to help you if there was an issue and there were three different types of bridges. One was wood over a hundred years old, one was concrete, one was steel. And really the hardest part was to wrap your mind around working in a floodway that if they called you, you had to get 3 million worth of equipment out of that floodway in minutes, because something might be coming if there's a storm north.

So that was the hardest part was getting all those risk assessments settled. And then the other part was, I'm an amateur historian. So it was really hard to take down a bridge that was old, that old. So we decided to do it with respect. And honestly, the best thing we ever did was hire a local contractor.

We were able to watch his videos of demolition online. And we saw one where the building didn't quite go down and the guy behind the camera had a great sense of humor and I thought, okay, I, I'm a warp sense of humor kind of person. Let's, let's work with this company. That company just were amazing. Oh, that's awesome.

Yeah. What's the name of it? Lloyd Neighbors demolition in Dallas and or Dallas area. So really the, the best thing that we did was hire a really good sub. So. Once we got on site, the realistic risks were of course flooding, but hogs, there were wild hogs everywhere. I could be out in the back of my truck looking at plans, and our safety guy, who's also my husband, would call and say, Hog alert, get in the bed of your truck.

Really? Yes. And, um,

[00:06:02] **Christi Powell:** fire. Well, you know I hear that

[00:06:03] **Christine Yerkes:** every day. No, you don't. Um, actually we do. We have a farm and I've got 20 of them. Oh, you do. And we don't engage. Anybody

[00:06:09] **Christi Powell:** want to go home? I don't hear that every day.

[00:06:12] **Christine Yerkes:** And the other thing is the public outcry about bringing down a historic bridge. Yeah.

Because of course it was in the

[00:06:18] **Christi Powell:** news. Right. So

[00:06:22] **Christine Yerkes:** it was okay. The way we handled it is we just stopped and the guys would keep working and the leadership for Yerkes would just go out and chat with people and say, Hey, this is why we're doing this. You're going to get a really nice park here. Cause that's why we were taking them down because they were dangerous, frankly.

Deadly dangerous. And, um, you climb up on one of these bridges, which was very easy to do, and it was 23 feet tall with no safety measures. So, anyway, so we took them down, and a lot of people who came by to say goodbye to the bridge left with a souvenir we gave in hopes they'd dart. The railroad company's not listening, but we gave away railroad spikes.

And, believe me, when we had an excavator that had a Six and a half foot claw working next to a new commuter train within 10 feet. There was a lot of sucking into the breath I bet. But the guy that was running makes me wanna do that now. Oh, it, it was crazy. But the, yeah, the guy running that, that, um, piece of equipment was amazing.

He had to be, and he never, never risk in his mind. So we brought her down in record time and finished three months early. That's

[00:07:31] **Christi Powell:** amazing. Yeah. Well, the other thing you did too, was 86 percent recycling rate of materials. I mean, tell us a little bit about that on that. That's some pretty innovative sustainability.

Especially when you're talking about wood, concrete

[00:07:47] **Christine Yerkes:** and steel. Yeah, it wasn't easy. Really, the best thing that we did, number 1, hire a great contractor, subcontractor. That's all they do. All they do is demo. And we went through many, many meetings before we even mobilized saying, how are we going to do this?

And trying to assess the risks, this company didn't work for the federal government a lot, so we spent a lot of time saying, you have to do it this way. Oh, yeah, this is the way we're going to do it. This is the way we have to sort it because we had to get everything every night out of the floodplain.

Because just in case there was a flood, because I agree. So, anyway, long story short, they just picked everything apart and placed it in piles and fortunately, concrete with steel in it. Can be taken to the concrete plant and they'll. Oh, nice. So that helped a lot. So really, it wasn't hard to get the 86 percent right after you had figured out the weights of everything and the percentages.

And then we had three equipment operators, three pieces of equipment, all of them working together to sort all this into three parts. That's awesome. Yeah. Yeah. Wow.

[00:09:03] **Christi Powell:** 84 Lumber Company is the nation's largest privately held supplier of building materials, manufactured components, and industry leading services for single and multifamily residences and commercial buildings. The company operates 310 facilities, which include stores, component manufacturing plants. custom door shops and engineered wood product centers in 35 states.

84 Lumber Company also offers turnkey installation services for a variety of products, including framing, installation, siding, windows, roofing, decking, and drywall. For more information, visit 84lumber.com.

[00:09:48] **Angela Gardner:** Well, first off, I want to say that. It is extremely hard to get your Florida license, builder's license. I just want to note that on here. So kudos to you. Thank you. So I want to ask this question as a woman in a male populated industry, which you've been there pretty much all of your career. What strategies have you employed to successfully navigate and lead in the construction and federal contracting sectors?

Like what advice would you give other women seeking? You know, to excel in a similar role as yours or either, you know, move up that ladder and be CEO like

[00:10:24] **Christine Yerkes:** you did. Don't go in there thinking you're a minority. You're just you. Just be yourself. Be yourself. Love that. Don't go in there thinking I'm a woman.

They're all men. Go in there thinking I am woman. I got this. And you just got to get, honestly. Early on, there were a lot of problems, men and women working together in construction. I just turned a blind eye to it. And I was myself and if they didn't like me, who cared I could, I could care at home and cry at home, but I had an outward persona of this is the way it's going to be.

Right. And, you know, it's amazing when you talk to people and you know what you're talking about and you work harder than they do, you work longer hours than they do, how you eventually earn their respect. And if you don't earn their respect, they're not worth getting their respect. Right.

[00:11:13] **Christi Powell:** They're not your people.

[00:11:14] **Christine Yerkes:** Right. Just be yourself. And, you know, and if you're a comedian at heart, that never hurts to have a good sense of humor, but you also have to be dignified. And represent yourself. Well, don't don't go in there like a little school girl. If you're 22 years old, working with 50, 60 year old men, don't worry about it.

You're you, you've got your qualifications. You're there to right. So, yeah,

[00:11:39] **Christi Powell:** yeah, it's all about the image you have in your own head. Right.

[00:11:43] **Christine Yerkes:** Right and what I would strongly advise anybody going into construction and they want to move up, join professional societies, learn how to speak. I speak at every conference I go to it's free marketing.

It's also, um, if I didn't speak every few months, I wouldn't be able to sit here and talk to you. I'd be a nervous wreck.

[00:12:03] **Christi Powell:** Right. It just helps take the edge

[00:12:06] **Christine Yerkes:** off. Doesn't it? Yeah. Yeah. Toastmasters, anything. Join the Society of Women Engineers. Join Women in Construction. Talk to older women. Just gain that confidence.

And if you're not confident, act like you are. Yes. Thank you. Awesome advice. As it becomes reality. Yeah.

[00:12:25] **Angela Gardner:** Well, we've, we've kind of already highlighted how you have an amazing, extensive amount of experience and especially in the military and federal construction. Could you share some of the key insights into the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the projects you've been on and, um, how they differ from other types of construction

[00:12:46] **Christine Yerkes:** work?

There's nothing more different than federal and commercial construction. Thank you. I haven't done a lot of commercial, but, you know, you see it out there and, you know, it's going on federal construction. It is almost all paperwork. If you can get the paperwork done and work through it with the government as a team.

You'll be okay in the beginning if you start thinking, why do they do this? Why do I have to submit this? This is stupid. You're not going to win now, give it up and do it or hire somebody to do it for you. That knows how to do it. And

[00:13:21] **Angela Gardner:** yeah, I was going to ask if you could do that, if you could get like somebody that knows, because it sounds like you come at it from having done it on the flip side to knowing what you have to do on the other side.

And so there are consultants

[00:13:34] **Christine Yerkes:** out there that help. Yes, there are. And there's also people retiring from the military at 40 years old, right? that can also help. All right. Air Force are contracting officers as enlisted. How would they find them? Uh, just go to the bases, I guess, and go to the S. A. M. E. meetings.

Go to the S. A. M. E. Those are great technical societies. If people belong to a technical society, normally they really care about their career. Um, there's contract, there's contracting officers that belong to contracting functions or technical societies, excuse me, but it's really the paperwork that's so different and getting that done, you know, the safety plans and all that.

And then when you get on base, being able to get on base can be difficult. Yeah. Got to make sure you get your people ahead of time. And then once you're on base. They're gonna have rigorous safety standards. Um, there's going to be people coming by. There's going to be people trying to tell you what to do.

And it's sometimes it's really hard to know who to listen to. So. Best advice, I think, is if you're doing your first federal job, get to know the government, be honest, hey, this is my first government job, and if you've got a good government team, they want you to succeed. Right. They want you to do their work.

Occasionally you'll get a team that's not so hot, they just want to see if they can put you under, but 99 percent of them aren't like that at all. No matter what people spread rumors about.

[00:15:01] **Christi Powell:** Well, it wastes their time. It does. Doesn't it waste their time if they want you to go down? I mean, that doesn't make any sense.

[00:15:08] **Christine Yerkes:** It doesn't, and then they fail because their projects suck. Right. So, that's, that's not the norm. And I know rumors go around a lot that the government employees are horrible to work with. Well, I was one. And all I wanted to do was get the work done and I wanted high quality safely. And that's what we provide as a company.

So if you're working on a federal installation, just make sure you've got good, qualified people doing great quality work. And if they tell you that something isn't quite right, look it up in the contract, figure it out together, and correct it. And work as a team partner with the government. Because if you become that filthy contractor, they've got the power to bury you.

Yeah, well, but they won't know

[00:15:50] **Christi Powell:** all the ones at 84 that we've had the opportunity to work with are so great They they want you to succeed. They want to make sure you understand all the rules They want to make sure that yeah, you don't have any fines like they've been very clear up front It hasn't been what like you said the rumors were

[00:16:08] **Christine Yerkes:** Yeah, and the rumors are not real.

They're not. There are people out there. I've met some of them, but as a federal contractor, we also know where we won't work. Right? We know the teams that okay. We know in Pensacola, NAVFAC, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, mouthful, um, has a great group of people in the main office. You know, I love working with them.

Nice. I work with them often. And there's another group, you know, maybe for somebody else that, Ooh, no, don't go there. So we're just learning. And if you're willing to work hard and do it well with an even calm demeanor, most people will be happy to create a team with you and they'll bring you back. Repeat work is the best compliment.

Well, and once

[00:16:55] **Christi Powell:** you get through all those hurdles, right? The first contract, they know that you know what they need. And so from there, it gets easier for them to hire you again, so that you're not having to go through that

over and over again. I love that. I love It's really built in a way that makes the most sense to have relationships, right?

When you build a relationship and you get to know what they need and what you need, then the next thing you know, you have a marriage of a great opportunity and it just keeps growing from there and you keep growing together from there. And you know, it's not just in federal contracting. If you apply that to your business as a whole, it seems to be a much better process.

It's not short and easy. It's usually the long game. And you have to build those

[00:17:40] **Christine Yerkes:** relationships to get there. Yeah.

[00:17:43] **Angela Gardner:** Yeah. Definitely the long game. Mm hmm. Do we have time for one more question? Oh, for sure. Yeah. Christine has had loads of successful projects, so this is kind of wrapping or talking about that.

Um, in your experience working with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, what lessons have you learned? That have been particularly valuable in developing and managing successful design build and renovation projects. How do you see the future of federal construction evolving in the coming years? I think honestly,

[00:18:19] **Christine Yerkes:** I think just having a good attitude and being able to be personable enough to make the connections and you have to have reasonable prices to win the work and then go in there with a qualified team go in there organized.

And with a great attitude and become part of the team and get the work done and communication, there is nothing that replaces it. Bad communication will will kill a project. So, 1 of the things that my mentor, when I was with the government, 1 of my mentors, her name was Tina, and she always looked at me and she said, Christine, you document, you document, and then you document some more for the government.

So. If you have it in writing, people will complain, have detailed daily reports. If you just do things the way the government wants it, and you get good at it, they're going to call you back. Yeah. And you do it with a pleasant attitude and understand that the government isn't rich. They don't have a ton of money.

This is just an individual installation that has a limited budget. And you go in there knowing they've got a budget and that you've got a fair price. And you

convey that and you're honest with them. For example, whenever there's a change order, I present all my subcontractors proposals to the government here.

This is for you to look at. This is what they see me and then we negotiate our rates. If they feel those prices are fair, but if our price is escalated, because, you know, 1 generator is 1.3 Million, but they thought it was only going to be 500K. I've got the proposal to show them. Right. You don't just be open, honest, pleasant, and have a teaming environment and talk a lot.

Talk a lot. Well, that just seems easy. Don't email. Don't text. Talk. Yeah. Face to face. Meetings. Good point. Over communicate if you have to. Over

[00:20:12] **Christi Powell:** communicate. I love that. Yeah. And it's so important in our industry. And you know, that's why we have to have lean conversations all the time, right? Because that communication's gone in a lot of areas.

Yeah, I love that. So we are changing the perception of non traditional roles, one conversation at a time. So if you were the 20 year old Christine, what would you like to tell students if they're listening to the podcast today? Volunteer.

[00:20:43] **Christine Yerkes:** Nice. Love it. Get in with the technical societies and volunteer.

That's wonderful. Get a leadership position, become secretary, become vice president, learn. These people that go to technical societies, they're the ones that care. They're the ones that are good. Get out there and volunteer because in your company, wherever you end up working the first time, they're not going to give you a leadership position.

So you got to be humble at work. Very humble. But you can also be working on your skills in communication, leadership, and work on your confidence. Go to the Society of American Military Engineers, go to Women in Construction, Society of Women Engineers, and volunteer for a leadership position. Because what happens if you fail in a volunteer leadership position?

Yeah. Nothing. You just

[00:21:28] **Christi Powell:** learn. You learn. That's

[00:21:30] **Christine Yerkes:** it. Right. Exactly. What if, and if you fail in your job, get fired. Get fired. So volunteer for technical societies and I can't stress

that enough. So many people these days communicate by text, um, social media, and they're so shy and they don't know how to communicate.

Get out there and communicate. Yeah.

[00:21:51] **Christi Powell:** That's going to put you way above the rest,

[00:21:54] **Christine Yerkes:** right? 100%. You will be hands. You would just be so far ahead of everybody else if you can just communicate well. Yeah.

[00:22:02] **Christi Powell:** Well, for that advice and thank you for sharing your story today and talking about some of your projects. We just can't wait to share your story with the world.

It'll be on YouTube. But before we get off here, I want to make sure that all of our audience knows how to get a hold of your keys contractors. Yes, can you tell them how to get a hold

[00:22:21] **Christine Yerkes:** of you? Sure. I can do that. We do talk about your keys construction a lot. It's actually your key self incorporated. Okay, so many people, because we always talk your keys, your keys, your keys, your keys.

So, it's actually your key South incorporated. You Google us. You can find us at South Inc. That come, you can also reach me on email and I'm sure the ladies here will provide my email address in the notes. Anytime if I don't respond to your email, don't take it personally ever just just send a follow up and that's the best way to get me.

I give you my phone number, but love to hear for anybody who would like to talk construction. If there's anything I can do to help people. I, I do enjoy coaching

[00:23:04] **Christi Powell:** awesome. We love that Christine. And also, obviously, you, you are open to getting more work. So if there's people out there listening right now, That wants a federal contractor with her experience.

Please reach out to her as well. Thank you again, Christine, for being on today. We really appreciate you and hope to see you very soon. Actually, I'm really excited about being on the women construction owners and executive board with you in 2024. And

[00:23:30] **Christine Yerkes:** me too. I'm excited as well. Thank you

so

[00:23:33] **Christi Powell:** much. Have a good

[00:23:34] **Christine Yerkes:** day.

Well,

[00:23:39] **Christi Powell:** that's all for this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the Women Talk Construction Podcast with your hosts, Christy Powell and Angela Gardner. See you

[00:23:48] **Christine Yerkes:** next time.