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Building respect took time

Spare Change SUSAN STIGER Of the Journal

So many accolades have been shoveled back and forth in the research for this column that we now have ourselves a nice, level construction site, figuratively speaking.

So, let's go to our newly flattened ground and meet the builders of this story: Linda Squires, longtime construction superintendent for Jaynes Corp., retired in 2003; Jaynes, Squires' woman-in-aman's-world proving ground; and Lafarge North America, more proving ground, and like Jaynes, hero in the end.

When Squires was a kid — say 50 years ago — she took on the role of splintered prodigy to her handy father, helping him remodel their attic into a bedroom. "I knew I wanted to build after that," she said.

Her dad may have found that impressive, but the construction industry, some 20 years later, wasn't all that welcoming. The carpenters' union was trying to meet a federal mandate to open itself up to women, but evidently Squires wasn't supposed to take that seriously. Finally, as an inexperienced preapprentice, she got herself on a log of potential workers looking for assignments. A Jaynes job hauling 2x12s came up and three guys in line ahead of her said, "Oh, no, that's too hard," she recalled. "They said Jaynes had a reputation for being hard working."

So she said, "I'll take it."

That was 30 years ago when, "I didn't know enough to say no. That was my start. It was quite the trial."

It started like this: She took her little piece of official paper to the superintendent on the job. "He grabbed it, took one look at it and said, 'God damn it,' turned around, walked off, and said, 'Go over there and get to work.'"

It got worse. At one point, he said, "If you can't read that tape measure, give it to (somebody else.)" She threw the tape measure at him, well, toward him, considering her aim. He was screaming at her, then he threw his hard hat toward her. The joy of a blossoming new career came with verbal assaults, too. "You're taking a job away from a man who could feed his family" was a common one.

Higher up the food chain, she said, cooler heads prevailed, seeing the wisdom of drawing talent from the untapped half of mankind. "The company itself was very supportive," she said.

In the decades that followed, Squires mastered carpentry, learned the construction business, stopped throwing tape measures, climbed the ladder and became New Mexico's first female construction superintendent, and one of its most admired, requested and emulated.

"The superintendent is the top building official on a job site," said Doug Clark, director of business development at Jaynes, a company of 530 employees. "A superintendent is responsible for the oversight and coordination of all the different trades — everything from dirt to infrastructure to final cleaning ... and little things. At the end, you walk around and find that maybe the painter got paint on an electrical receptical. And, you're in charge of safety."

Though she didn't know it, wasn't assigned it and wouldn't admit to it now, Squires was also in charge

of changing Jaynes.

“In the heat of battle, it was easy for us in the office to revert to the old-style mentality of construction,” Clark said. “We always said the biggest, strongest, toughest SOB on the job was the head, whoever could yell the loudest. She was the opposite. She didn’t raise her voice. She was polite, direct. She would clearly articulate the issue and then if a person or firm (subcontractor) couldn’t figure it out, she would offer her professional suggestions to get conversations going.”

Among her tangible contributions are her work overseeing the building of the Lovelace Women’s Hospital on Montgomery when it was still St. Joe’s and New Mexico’s main recycling center, the Cerro Colorado. In 1991, the Albuquerque Subcontractors Association named her outstanding job superintendent of New Mexico.

And so on ... Clark said a bunch more flattering things about Squires; Squires said a bunch more flattering things about Jaynes, and Lincoln Galassini, a value-added specialist at cement supplier Lafarge North America, said flattering things about both. And the Jaynes people said flattering things about Lafarge. But we just don’t have that much space here.

What matters is that the woman who brought a new era of civility to New Mexico’s construction industry, and then had to retire with, of all things, heart problems, got a gift in the end — one that wipes out the throwing of the hard hat, the comments about taking jobs away from men and the theft of an entire set of tools. (She got new ones and painted them a lovely, crime-deterrent pink.)

About a month ago, Squires lunched with some former colleagues and afterward asked one of them, Ed Sims, Jaynes’ senior vice president, to recommend somebody to pour concrete at the house she and her partner have been building for 20 years. A portal and a greenhouse are all she and Merlene DuBre have left to do. She just wanted a name. One thing led to another, with a lot of “Linda?” “It’s for Linda?” “Linda needs something?” and pretty soon Jaynes was contributing \$1,600 worth of labor and Lafarge was contributing \$1,200 worth of concrete. Squires had the leftover concrete made into stepping stones, into which she wrote, “Thank you, Jaynes” and “Thank you, Lafarge” in as permanent a record as she could make.

Not that she’d ever forget.

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SQUIRES: Construction industry hard to crack



COURTESY LINDA SQUIRES From left, Lawrence Chavez, Osvaldo Trevizo, Celedon Chavez, John Kantack and Ignacio "Nacho" Estrado built a patio for former colleague Linda Squires.