

WRITING SAMPLE

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**How to Succeed...
A Close-up on Joelle Hertel, '83 BSCE
by Lynne Arany**



Coming off of San Antonio's I-410 loop, in the wide open dust flats ahead I encounter a distinctly Southwestern Stonehenge. Giant tower cranes, as much as 10-stories-tall, define the immense geographic bowl, punctuated by the shorter, but no less impressive gaggle of standard-height units. It was then, back in 1992, that I finally began to grasp the remarkable career Hertel had ahead of her.

That project, the 225.3 million dollar Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC), was a critical moment in Hertel's engineering career—and in her life in general. Hertel, a single mom of twin sons, had already had begun to establish herself as a Southwest archaeologist (UNM, 1977 M.A., Anthropology) when she realized she need to find work that would be more predictable—and more remunerative. Today, with some 25 years of experience under her belt—begun in 1983 when she completed her B.S. in UNM's Civil Engineering program—Hertel has more than made her mark in the construction world. And perhaps needless to say, has both impressed and made proud most anyone who has come to know her.

As Senior Vice President for The Clark Construction Group, Inc., one of the country's largest privately-held general contractors, she has overseen projects as sensitive as the post-9/11 Sea-Tac airport expansion in Seattle, through the oddball complexities of creating Grizzly Peak at Disney's California Adventure in Anaheim. And through it all, she has been driven by an unbounded passion for her work—a condition abetted by the many creative ways she can give back to the communities where Clark is building (from in-kind donations to labor support, and more), the intellectual stimulation, and these days, now that her sons Josh and Jake are settled into careers of their own (both construction-related), even the travel.

Currently the Officer-in-Charge of the Los Angeles County + University of Southern California (LAC+USC) Medical Replacement Facility, she has plenty of opportunity to engage the mental muscle that makes every project she's on "kind of a chess game." And to enjoy being relatively stationary, albeit in the pressure-cooker environment in which she thrives. Prior to this \$519 million, 1.5 million square-foot state-of-the-art venture, she has had plenty of opportunity to rack up the frequent flyer miles. In the early 2000s, while wrapping up Grizzly Peak (and dealing with deadline-threatening inquiries like, "What do you mean the concrete pour is late at Frog Jump Falls?"), she was regularly running up to the Seattle airport site as well as to Fresno for multiple projects, including Save Mart Arena. Prior to those, she was Project Executive for a mega- semiconductor plant (IBM/Toshiba in Manassas, VA) and the renowned M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

Ironically, she had held on to the notion that she was engaged in a “*job*,” not a “career,” so focused was she on making it possible for her kids to go to college and to provide a good home for them. She moved the family up to Washington state when the boys were just 10, for her first job in the field. Hired as Resident Engineer for the Veteran’s Administration Office of Construction, she won the position only after sending out some 100 résumés and flying under the radar of people thinking “Joelle” was, yes, a variation on Joel. While there, she got an M.S. in Engineering Management from St. Martin’s College, and even more importantly, began to develop the key relationships that would help establish her reputation—and begin to break down some of the preconceptions that shadow every woman in this field.

What’s especially important for outsiders to know about the world of construction, is that it is not typical for men or women to have an Engineering degree. The fact is, most of the top-level people have a Construction Management or a Business degree instead. So part of what gives Hertel her edge is that she did pursue the tougher civil engineering course, a fact made all the more significant when you consider that only 10.4% of all employed engineers are women, and most of those are in other engineering disciplines, such as mechanical, electrical, nuclear, or chemical.

It was however at UNM that she discovered her love for the construction aspects of engineering. A recipient of a much-needed Association of General Construction (AGC) scholarship, the fluke of its requirements led her into that concentration. Prior to that, aside from an unacknowledged affinity for mechanical thinking in her undergrad days, highly-rated math skills, and the unanalyzed pleasure of construction projects with her dad while she was growing up in Wisconsin, she’d had little support or considered assessment that she was, in fact, an ideal candidate not just for a job in the field, but of course a most successful career.

Hertel’s initial career path was in Anthropology and Archaeology though. The romance of it nabbed her early, and she first came to New Mexico to pursue that childhood dream. While employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), she got a feel for working in a team and the interpersonal skills that would hold her in good stead years later. The mapping and other field skills she acquired—along with the sense of humor that’s so desperately needed in construction’s high-stakes and close-quarters environment—would later prove to be useful as well. But archaeological surveys and excavations most often run on a 10-days on/4-days off schedule—not exactly suited to raising kids, despite the help of a few “rent-a-grannies.” So she took stock, and moved on.

It is that kind of flexibility, a keen and nimble thinking, along with a creative instinct for making progress in all manner of adverse and otherwise challenging conditions—recalcitrant subcontractors, weather, equipment problems, material shortages, budget, bias, and more—that have moved her into the upper echelons of management. The cost-saving solutions that won Hertel respect early on, from those who would initially resist her direction because she was a woman, have continued to be a hallmark of her leadership style. She has championed a team approach to her jobsites, and ensures that her projects are peopled with professionals who know how much their contributions are valued, that mistakes will always be made but it is “critical to resolve them quickly, then laugh about them.” And so morale is kept at an exemplary high.

Despite all that, there is still much work to be done to both make her profession more inviting to women and to make that proverbial playing-field even once they are in it. Hertel’s credo, “to just work hard and not let it get in my way,” cannot be as easy as she makes it look. And despite being sought as a mentor by both men and women, which one might see as evidence that she is, as Hertel says, “seen as a success, not just as a woman who is successful,” there is definitely room for improvement. At the negotiation stages of her current hospital project—a joint venture

with two other major construction firms, with Hertel's being the managing partner—she was for months referred to as “my guy” by her firm's dealmakers. It was not until the deal was firmly and finally in place that they would introduce her to the other partners. Unsurprisingly, she brought the entire staff around rapidly, and today, future joint projects are contemplated—this time with her in the lead at the request of all concerned.

She does however, easily acknowledge the disconnect between work and a stable home life. As she says, for most folks in her field, “your family is the jobsite.” Nevertheless, she understandably looks forward to settling again back in New Mexico where she owns a home out near Sedillo, backing on to her sister Jean's property. (N.M. is a family affair—Hertel's other sister Jackie, a painter and teaching sub, is an Albuquerque resident; Jean is a local elementary-school teacher.)

With hopes and plans to give back to her profession and to others entering non-traditional career paths, we are certain Hertel will accomplish that and more with the same extremely discipline—and absolute passion—she has for any work she does, and just about any endeavor she undertakes.

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