

AMS Elite Solutions' Julie Savitt: Don't treat me as a 'he' or 'she.' Just treat me as a professional

By Dan Rafter, Editor

Running your own business and raising three children at the same time? That's tough. Doing it as a single mother? That adds even more challenges. And doing it in an industry still dominated by men? That's yet one more hurdle.

But that's what Julie Savitt has done. Savitt is president and owner of AMS Elite Solutions, a construction hauler based in Lake Villa, Illinois. It's a role she's held since 2004, when she founded AMS with her former partner. And it's a role she took on alone when four years later, that partner suddenly had to leave the United States.

Savitt faced a new set of challenges, then, in 2008. She was determined to not let AMS die. But she uncovered debts that the business faced, debts she didn't know existed. At the same time, the strain of raising a family on her own pulled at her time.

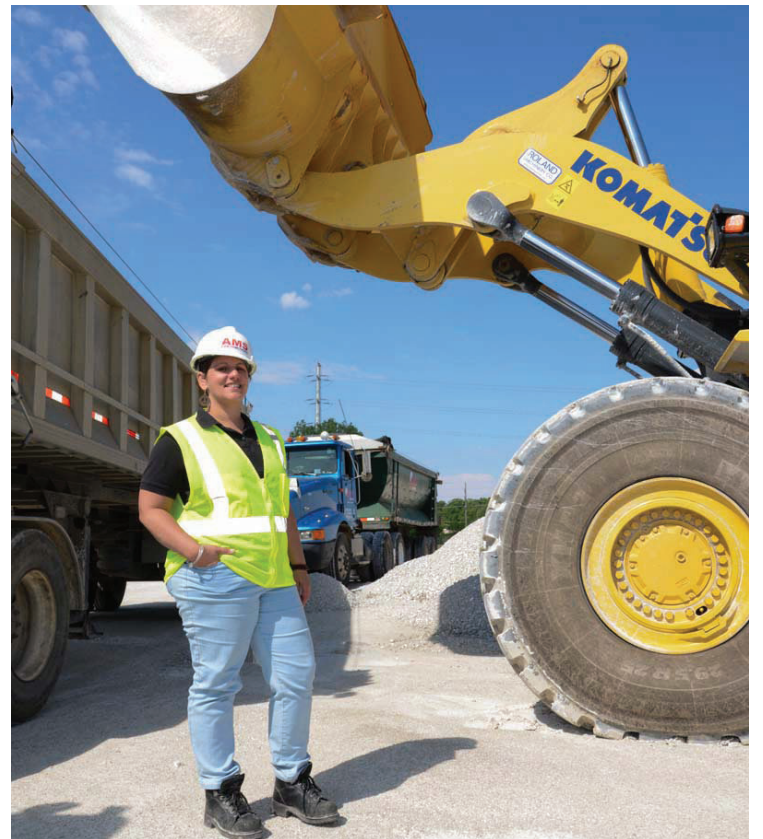
Savitt, though, didn't give up. Instead, she took classes at Cycle-of-Success Institute, a Chicago-based program that teaches entrepreneurs how to boost the profits and success rate of their businesses. She applied for and earned a spot in a seven-month executive training program offered through the e200 Emerging Leaders program of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

But most of all, Savitt worked. Hard.

And today? AMS has grown from one truck when it first opened to 12 trucks. The size of the jobs that AMS takes on has grown, too. An example? Savitt says that AMS recently landed a five-year project of \$11 million to \$13 million.

This success is satisfying. But Savitt says that the best part of her job is helping to bring other women into a field that, despite progress, is mostly a male-dominated one.

"There is still discrimination against women and minorities every day," Savitt said. "But it has gotten better. When I first encountered it, it hurt. I wondered why I was even trying to work in this field.



Left: Julie Savitt at the controls. Right: Savitt poses with some of AMS Elite Solutions' equipment.

"Excitement is seeing small businesses succeed. It's exciting to see women get the opportunity to work on jobs in this industry."

But then I got involved in business and legislative organizations. I saw changes being made. I saw that by being involved in these organizations, I could make a difference. That became my mission in life. I knew that I could help make an impact for women and minorities in this industry."

This is why Savitt spends so much of her time serving as a mentor to women and minorities, helping them make their own inroads in commercial real estate and construction. Seeing her fellow women succeed has become a passion for Savitt.

"It's not the everyday running of the business that is exciting to me," Savitt said. "Excitement is seeing small busi-

nesses succeed. It's exciting to see women get the opportunity to work on jobs in this industry that they might in the past not have had the chance to participate in. The mentality once was that everyone in this industry expected to see a white male on the jobs or in the field. I saw that and decided to try to make a difference. It's about opening this industry to everyone."

An early inspiration

Savitt was exposed to commercial real estate early in life. Her grandfather, Maury Young, was a developer who worked in Chicago. Savitt said that Young's dream was to connect the China-

town neighborhood with the rest of Chicago. Young helped do this by building parking lots, taking down buildings that weren't up to code and working with famed advocate for the poor, Jane Addams, to build affordable places for Chicagoans to live.

Savitt refers to her grandfather as a visionary. But Savitt didn't go into the commercial hauling business because of him. Before taking over AMS, she worked in the education and healthcare fields. Savitt's former husband, though, wanted to work as a truck driver. After he accomplished this goal, Savitt began working in the industry almost by default, she said.

It was a struggle at first for Savitt's ex-husband to land trucking jobs. Savitt saw that her former husband was discriminated against because he was Hispanic. Savitt advised him to cut his hair shorter and shave off his moustache to look less "ethnic."

"It was day and night after that," Savitt said. "People didn't recognize him. He started getting jobs. That partly inspired my mission to help make the construc-

tion industry a more even playing field. I said to myself, ‘If I am going to be in this business, something good has to come from it.’”

There are more women in commercial real estate and construction today. But Savitt said that both industries still remain mostly dominated by men.

Empowering women

Savitt is taking steps to bring more women into the business. She works closely with officials at organizations such as the Illinois Department of Transportation, the Illinois Tollway, City of Chicago and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, recommending women-owned businesses to them and sharing projects from these agencies with her fellow female industry professionals.

Savitt also mentors younger women trying to enter the business, often helping them through the process of earning their certifications. When she hires women at her firm, she makes sure they earn a fair wage.

“I am seeing a generational change happening,” Savitt said. “More women are coming to the table. It’s about education. It’s about empowerment.”

Savitt points to a woman on one of AMS’ recent jobs who drives a massive 18-wheeler. Women, Savitt said, need to see professionals like this to understand the opportunities that are available to them in commercial real estate and construction.

“I should have taken a picture of her and asked her permission to post it on Facebook,” Savitt said. “I want women to get empowered by this amazing person driving 70,000 pounds down the street. What does that story tell other women? That they can do anything.”

Savitt also participates in industry panels and is a willing interview subject for industry trade publications. This, too, is important in inspiring other women to join the industry.

“We have to tell our stories,” Savitt said. “We have to tell women that they can do anything.”

This is an important step in bringing more women into the business, Savitt said. She tells the story of her father who ran a shoe business. When he was ready to retire, he offered the business to Savitt’s brothers. He never asked Savitt, though, if she wanted to take over the enterprise.

And it’s not as if Savitt wasn’t familiar



Savitt stepping into one of her company’s vehicles.

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with the business. She worked in her father’s shop on Saturdays regularly, something she started when she was 9.

Later, Savitt’s father accompanied Savitt to an awards ceremony in Florida for women who ran successful businesses. He saw then just how much Savitt had accomplished with AMS Elite Solutions.

“He cried when he told me how he never realized how much I had achieved,” Savitt said. “He was amazed at how much revenue the business was doing. He realized that every woman in that room was doing a spectacular job with their businesses. He said he felt bad that he never sought to embrace my talent for business. That is the mentality women have been up against. It has to change over time. It is inbred in how we were raised. It’s about empowering women and showing them by example what we can do.”

Gaining the confidence

Savitt understands the hesitancy some women might have about entering commercial real estate. She understands because she experienced the comments and disrespect when she was starting in the business herself.

“I never thought being a woman would impact my ability to be successful in my business,” Savitt said. “It was really surprising. I didn’t think people would be so disrespectful. I didn’t think they’d call me ‘sweetie,’ ‘honey’ or ‘babe.’”

But they did. And Savitt worked through it. She steadily built her confidence as she gained more success in the industry.

Confidence, though, was only one hurdle. Savitt had to make connections, too. As a shy person, networking didn’t

come naturally to Savitt. But Savitt worked on that. She made connections, which helped AMS pick up more work. And as more work came her way, Savitt’s confidence continued to rise.

“As I gained confidence and experience and became established, I began to feel that I had a voice and that I needed to use it,” Savitt said. “When I felt that there was something that was unjust or not OK, I’d do my best to say something about it.”

For instance, when male counterparts called her “sweetie,” Savitt responded by saying that she was already someone else’s sweetie. She’d instead ask these men to call her “Julie.”

“I had to figure it out,” Savitt said. “I never wanted to burn bridges in this business. I had to find my voice. People had to learn who I was. That got me the respect. And once I had the respect, that gave me the confidence to make sure that people treated me as a professional. I didn’t want to be treated as a ‘he’ or a ‘she,’ just as a professional.”