

Against THE ODDS

As one of few women in the engineering industry, Marie Willis felt the cards were stacked against her—and yet she still managed to build a thriving construction company



CIVIL SERVICE Willis provides engineering and construction services to the US military.

MARIE WILLIS' CAREER has been studded with challenges. When she studied construction management at California State University, Long Beach—"I always had an interest in construction, architecture, and building," she says—Willis was one of only four women in her department.

She realized she was an outlier, and became determined to succeed in spite of it. In 1996, she went to work for Phillips National, a San Diego-based general contractor that specializes in change-of-occupancy maintenance for family housing on military bases. Although she'd only graduated college a year earlier, Willis was determined to prove herself as management material.

"I wanted to be a superintendent," Willis says. "I'm sure they looked at me—straight out of college, no experience and a woman, on top of that—and thought, 'She wants to be out in the field? Yeah, right.' But they gave me a chance." Willis soon began work on a project at the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base in San Diego. Although she knew nothing about building wells, she successfully managed the project to completion. Subse-

quently, she managed approximately \$50 million worth of construction for Phillips National.

Then, Willis had an epiphany: she was already playing the part of boss, so she might as well become one. In March 2000, she quit her job and started MW Services, a full-service engineering and construction firm that specializes in federal contracts for the US military, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the General Services Administration.

To get her business off the ground, Willis turned to the US Small Business Administration's (SBA) Mentor-Protégé Program, which helps socially and economically disadvantaged entrepreneurs compete for government contracts as part of the SBA's 8(a) Business Development program. After cementing a mentorship with San Diego-based government-contracting firm All Star Services Corporation—a relationship that included joint ventures, advisement, and capital investment—she applied for the program and was accepted in 2001.

Since then, Willis says, the firm has "done some amazing projects. We've done work on airfields.

We've built a flight simulator. We've installed 10 miles worth of water lines. We get to do things that most general contractors would never get a chance to do."

Having achieved her initial dream—MW Services is now a leading government contractor with 40 employees and approximately \$10 million a year in guaranteed revenue from long-term government contracts—Willis has now set her sights on a new dream. In addition to engineering and construction, she wants to do design.

In 2008, MW Services made design-build projects a major priority; since then, it's completed \$18 million worth of design-build work. Because she wants to be more hands-on than a CEO, however, Willis recently started a side project. Along with her husband, she's designing and building a LEED-Platinum Spanish colonial home in Murrieta, California.

"We plan on living in it for a couple of years, then using it to launch a second business, this one a custom residential business," Willis says.

—MATT ALDERTON

Congratulations Marie

We wish you and MW Services Inc. continued success!

MW Services Inc. is a company that sets the standard for quality, integrity and hard work in the industry. For more than 23 years, Marks, Golia & Finch, LLP, has served the construction industry, representing prominent contractors throughout California. With construction and its related labor and employment aspects as its primary practice, you can expect immediate responses to your legal needs from lawyers who know your business.

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Grossberg Company LLP wishes Mrs. Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, and the National Museum of Women In The Arts continued success for many years to come.

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