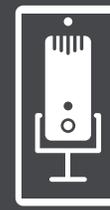


Episode: 27

Letitia Hanke



THE
**MOBILE
WORKFORCE**
PODCAST

Mike Merrill:

Hello, and welcome to the Mobile Workforce podcast, sponsored by About Time Technologies and WorkMax. I'm your host, Mike Merrill. And today we have a fantastic guests on that we're really excited about, and that is Mrs. Letitia Hanke. And Letitia is the founder and CEO of ARS Roofing Gutters and Solar out of Santa Rosa, California. Letitia has been featured on Mike Rowe's show, Returning the Favor. She's also been on the Kelly Clarkson show. Super cool. And she was named Residential Contractor of the Year in 2020 by Roofing Contractor. But Letitia is a lot more than just a construction entrepreneur. She's a founder of The LIME Foundation, a non-profit organization focused on helping young people in the Santa Rosa area discover real-world opportunities in the trades. Hello, Letitia and welcome.

Letitia Hanke:

Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Mike Merrill:

That's good. Well, so how are you doing today?

Letitia Hanke:

Pretty Good. I'm super happy that it's Friday.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, me too. That makes two of us. So you started ARS Roofing back in 2004. So we're, gosh, 15, almost 20 years now, quite a while. And you've grown the company up to about 24 employees now. So how did you get started in construction and what inspired you to take the leap into business for yourself and especially roofing?

Letitia Hanke:

I wasn't really expecting to get into roofing. I was in college, I'm a musician. I'm sure you can see the drums in the back. So I was actually in college at the time for music and performing and recording arts, but I was broke all through my college career and I needed a really good paying job. And when I was about 20 years old, I applied for roofing company, simply as the receptionist, answering the phones, filing. And I got connected at this wonderful company and started working there. And then after a few years, my boss decided that he wanted to retire and approached me about possibly buying his company a few years later. And I'm just like, "I'm not a roofer. I don't run a roofing company, but I'm not a roofer." And he's like, "Don't worry, I'll teach you." And literally, few years later, after being in the field, I was able to get my own contractor's license and started my own business.

Mike Merrill:

Every little girl wants to grow up and be a roofer. I know.

Letitia Hanke:

I knew that when I was nine years old, I wanted to be a roofer when I grew up.

Mike Merrill:

Sure. Love it. So now that you've been doing this for a while, what would you change or do differently if you could start over? What do you learn now that you maybe didn't understand when you first got into this?

Letitia Hanke:

I was trying in the very beginning, I didn't really know a lot what I was doing as far as being a business owner. I didn't take a business class. I didn't really know how to hire employees really, because I just, I got kind of thrown into it really. So in the beginning, I feel that if

I had taken a few more business classes, learned a little bit more about finances, profit and loss. I learned all that later on in life when I'm just broke. And then I finally started learning a little bit more with my accountant about how to read my numbers, how to be able to do my job costing. And that helped me so much. So finance, learning a little bit about the numbers early on. I think that would have definitely helped me be in a better position years later.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. I love that answer. I hear that a lot. That's the biggest challenge. We're blue collar people in the construction industry. And so the business side is often where maybe the gap could be that's.

Letitia Hanke:

That's right.

Mike Merrill:

So speaking of that, kind of leads into my next question. If you were going to give advice to somebody who's listening that may have interest in starting their own business, or maybe they're newly started, what are, aside from finance and job costing, what are some other tips that you would give those folks?

Letitia Hanke:

Don't start with your own money. I remember, when I owned my house at the time when I first started, and I took a loan out on the house so I could have the money to get into there. And I'm just like, "Oh my goodness, what am I doing?" And then the market crashed and it was just crazy. And I'm just like, "I'm going to lose all my money." And so I recommend, and I even tell a lot of people now when I talk to them about starting a businesses, there are different grants available out there for starting a small business. And then there's other programs, like small business administration, the SBA loan, which is what I got to actually start my company. So it's great to have that opportunity to actually have some seed money to start off with so that way you can have a little bit of cushion because that cushion becomes very important.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. Construction is definitely not for the faint of heart. So I feel your pain. I actually grew up in construction, had a construction business for over a decade also before I helped start our software company. So definitely know the bumps and bruises that you can take along the way.

Letitia Hanke:

That's correct. Ups and downs.

Mike Merrill:

So also you don't fit the typical profile of a roofing contractor, I've been to tons of roofing conventions and a little bit different packaging. So what can you tell us about that?

Letitia Hanke:

Well when I first got into roofing, well, I don't know any other African-American roofers at this time, especially here in California. But it was a big challenge for me, getting started as a female because I go to all these different male-dominated networking events and it's all men in there and I'm walking in, Miss Roofer. And it was a very interesting experience in the very beginning because they just weren't really accepting me into the industry because they're just like, "Who is this lady that thinks she's a roofer?" So it was challenging in the very, very beginning, but I pushed through.

Mike Merrill:

Good for you. Yeah. I was doing a little research and I did come up with some statistics. One of the stats was that only 10% of the people working in construction comprised of women.

Letitia Hanke:

Yep.

Mike Merrill:

And that's overall. 87% of those, so 8.7 of the 10, were working in office positions. And then only two and a half were tradespeople.

Letitia Hanke:

That's right. Yeah. And there's 3% are roofers. And then I don't even know what the percentage of African-American roofers. I haven't even made it that far to research to see how many are actually women of color that are in this industry as well. So that's a whole nother set of numbers.

Mike Merrill:

And kudos to you for pushing through whatever those barriers may have been, or may still be. Obviously you're thriving, which is fantastic.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes. It feels good.

Mike Merrill:

You have such a positive energy and a vibe and just a fantastic smile and I can feel your energy even through the monitor. So I appreciate it.

Letitia Hanke:

Thank you. I'm excited to be here. Just talking about it makes me really happy.

Mike Merrill:

I could tell. So even within that, so one other statistic that was interesting that I'd to drill down on a little bit, is only 13% of ownership in construction are women. So what can you tell us about that number? And what's been interesting to you in that experience?

Letitia Hanke:

Yeah, I think it's just because it is a male-dominated industry that it's intimidating. You have to have a really thick skin to really push forward and keep going in there, because everyone that you're working with, most of the contractors that I'm working with are male or were in the very beginning. Now's a little different, I've been encountering so many more women, finally getting into the trades. But in the beginning, it's just very intimidating.

So if you're not ready for that or prepared for that. I had really great mentors that were women that were in other industries like property management, but that's really male-dominated as well. And those mentors helped me to just prepare myself for it. And they said, "You're going to get this, this, this, and this, just ignore it and keep going." And I just always listened to that advice that they gave me and I ignored it and kept going. So that's what got me through. But some women and people in general just if they can't handle that extra pressure, it just makes it that much harder for them to focus on what needs to get done. And I just focused, I stayed focused through the whole thing and that's why we're where we are today. So it's been great.

Mike Merrill:

I love that. And I love that you mentioned mentors because I know that I hear that a lot. That's a critical piece. What would you say about the mentors that helped you through that journey?

Letitia Hanke:

It was just that they'd been through it. So they were able to really kind of prepare me for it. And I have business coaches as well. I couldn't be doing what I'm doing today without really great coaches. They're both females that have just really gotten me, even my therapist, I have a life coach, a therapist, and a business coach. And they just really get me through that day to day and just keep me very, very focused. So that's definitely something I definitely recommend is that, if you're going to start a business or get into this kind of industry, you need someone that's going to help hold you accountable, number one, but also someone that you're going to be able to talk to when those times get really rough because you have peaks and valleys. So just remember that, there's always those peaks and valleys.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. I love that you mentioned that. I know when we look into the, even the professional sports arena or other areas, everybody has a coach, the best people in the world have that third person perspective that can help guide and direct. And I love that you're tapping into that, even in business.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes. For sure. It's very important. They give amazing guidance on the time management, helping me with my time management and being able to have family time or just even just my own personal time instead of working all the time. So my coaches have helped me with that these years.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. As an entrepreneur, it's a slippery slope, right?

Letitia Hanke:

You're working all the time. My son is 18 and I'm just like, "Oh wait, weren't you just a baby yesterday?" Because time just went by so fast. And when you're working a lot, it's just like, "Oh wow." Before you know what your kid is 18 years old. So it's crazy.

Mike Merrill:

As an entrepreneur of the business we'll gladly take any minute you'll give it. No question about it.

Letitia Hanke:

That's correct.

Mike Merrill:

So one of the other statistics that I was able to dig up, 64% is the increase amounts from 2004 to 2019, of women-owned businesses. So that's a big number and that's great to see. Are you witnessing more of that? Are you seeing that in your peer groups or among the associations you're involved in?

Letitia Hanke:

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. And it's so wonderful because I felt so alone. This was 17 years ago when I first started my own company and I felt so alone. The women that I would see at these networking events, they were usually the office ... just your statistics said, they were the office managers or the receptionist of those construction companies, but they weren't actually the contractors. So it was hard for me to really be able to connect. And so definitely over the last 10 years, for sure, so many more women contractors getting into

restoration and painting and just all these grueling type industries in the field. And I gravitated right to them. And we connect with each other and talk about all the things that we sometimes can't talk about to the males and we can relate to each other and really have that, we can rely on each other and help each other through those hard times. And I've just been seeing so many more women and I'm trying to get more women too, into construction as well. So it's important.

Mike Merrill:

I love that. There's this common theme I keep hearing and that is, networking and other people and associating and comparing notes, helping.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes.

Mike Merrill:

How important has that been?

Letitia Hanke:

It's been great because I couldn't do this alone. If I attempted to do this alone, I would have been gone a long time ago. And networking and talking to other contractors, male or female, just talking to them about best practices. We're not enemies. Even other roofers, I have other roofers that are my friends and we talk about best practices and how's it going for you? And those things are very helpful for all of us. We don't have to be enemies. We can work together and be able to create something even better if we're actually working together to make the industry a little better. So that's been very valuable for me to have that networking.

Mike Merrill:

Oh, I absolutely love that. So it sounds things are really moving the right direction, which is just fantastic.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes.

Mike Merrill:

There's still probably some barriers and some challenges. Have you had some experiences where you feel you didn't get the job or you didn't get something because of these other unique things about you compared to the typical roofer?

Letitia Hanke:

Yeah. I touched on it a little bit, number one, being a female already is just one of those things where sometimes other contractors have disparaged me. They don't even know who I am and they're telling customers, "Oh, you don't want to go with her. She doesn't know what she's talking about." But I've had to deal with it as being, not only a female, but also being African-American. As a female, when I first got into the industry, my very first encounter at a networking function, and back in the day when I first started 17 years ago, I just wanted to be one of the guys. I would wear my jeans and my boots. And I'm walking in, just try to be one of the guys.

And I was wearing this polo shirt with my logo on it. And we were at this networking event and one of the general contractors was hanging out with his buddies at the bar and I just kind of walk up and they see my logo and he's like, "Oh, you worked for ARS roofing?" I'm like, "Oh no, I'm actually the CEO." And he's like, "From the kitchen to the rooftop, huh?" That's what it was like for me in the very beginning, was that. That was my very first networking event, by the way, the first time I'm stepping out of my comfort zone. But being Black, experiencing the racism part of it, customers that don't want to shake my hand.

I used to hide a lot in the very beginning. I would sign my name L.R. Hanke so they would think that I'm a man. I didn't have my face on anything. And I remember a couple that I encountered, I went to their home to sign the contract, they didn't know I was Black. And the wife just jumps when she answers the door. And I'm about to come in and her husband comes over and I'm just like, "Hey, great to see you." And I put my hand out and he looks down at my hand, looks back at me and down in my hand again and he walked away. And I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, do I go inside this home or not?" And I go in, ready to sign the contract. And she's like, "Oh, I think we're not going to do the roof. We appreciate you coming by."

And I'm just like, "Well, I've got the sample boards here you like asked for, to look at colors." "Let's just do that on your way out." And I'm like, "Fine, no problem." And I'm walking out the door and the homeowner guy, he comes back over and he says, "I just want to let you know, we have an alarm system on our house. And if anyone tries to break in, it's going to go off really loud." And that's what he said to me as I'm walking out the door. And that's the kind of stuff that I've had to overcome and get through.

But that day when that happened, that was about eight years ago. That changed my life forever because I literally went back to my office. And by the way, I told him, thank you very much for that information. I went back to my office, took his contract, put it through the shredder and then I completely rebranded my business. I put my face literally on everything. If you go to my website, my face is everywhere. And then I changed my name to Letitia Hanke and I kind of came out and in so many ways, because it was my way of being able to say, "Okay, I'm not going to hide anymore." And my business literally catapulted from that day. Because now people wanted to support a Black-owned business and they wanted to support a woman-owned business. And that's how we've climbed to the top. So I should be thanking them for that. But that's what I've dealt with over the years.

Mike Merrill:

What a difficult, yet incredible experience. Good for you for being strong, doubling down.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes, for sure.

Mike Merrill:

And owning it. I absolutely love that. I'm very inspired by that. What advice would you give to other construction leaders, especially women, that are trying to break into this? What can they do to be proud upfront and own that earlier?

Letitia Hanke:

It's a great industry to be in. Construction, in general, but I love roofing. I think it's just a really beautiful art form and anyone who wants to break into construction, you just need to believe that you can do it. I was 20-something years old when I first started training in roofing. And I didn't think that that was something I would ever do. It was never on my mind to actually own a roofing company. I knew I wanted to own a business. I've always known that I wanted to be a business owner, I was a little entrepreneur when I was younger. But I just took that chance and took that risk. And then it all paid off in the long run. So it's really just being willing to take that chance and that risk and trying it out. And if it fails, it's okay. Being okay with failure is all right. And what if it doesn't fail? What if it ends up being a multimillion dollar company? Just take that chance and that risk and go for it.

Mike Merrill:

Oh, I love it. Good for you. I love how you, again, have continued to just buckle down and persevere and push through even among such ugliness and divisiveness that I can't believe, even whether it was seven or eight years ago, or I can't believe in the last 20 years that that could even happen.

Letitia Hanke:

Yeah. I know. It's hard. You're still there, but now it's different because everyone knows I'm Black. So it's great. I don't really have that many issues anymore and they know I'm female right off. I think that was just a great decision to make. And now I don't have that trouble. They know who I am when they call me. So it's been great. It's actually been a blessing. So again, I should be knocking on their door and thanking them for that.

Mike Merrill:

Good for you. I love that. I hope they listen to this.

Letitia Hanke:

If you're listening.

Mike Merrill:

So what advice would you give to companies that want to hire a more diverse workforce and want to help to improve those areas that we clearly still have room for improvement, as a country and as an industry?

Letitia Hanke:

I think it's about changing your mindset. I know when I'm talking to contractors or talking about a contractor, a lot of times they say he, he, he, instead of they. It's just starting to be more inclusive. There are a lot of females and young females that simply don't know that they can be in this type of industry because we're not telling them that. They're not hearing that. And so we've got to change ourselves into always thinking that it's a 'he' thing. It's not a 'he' thing, it's a 'they' thing. And if you want to have more diversity, you need to do more outreach. So diversity is in many different levels...

As far as diversity goes, diversity is in many different ways. It's not just your color or your race, but it's also whether you're hiring women, people young and old LGBTQ community, diversity is a big whole thing. And unless you're reaching out to those communities to join your team, you're going to always be seeing the same people. So I just always make a little extra effort to make sure that I have a very well diverse team at my company.

Mike Merrill:

Well, you're a great example to many of the rest of us. And I appreciate you sharing that.

Letitia Hanke:

Thank you.

Mike Merrill:

So many great efforts. You're doing so much good work. I don't know how you ... Do you ever even sleep?

Letitia Hanke:

No.

Mike Merrill:

Doesn't sound like it.

Letitia Hanke:

My coach helped me get sleep. My business coach. She's like, "Okay. So at this time you go to bed and at this time you wake up in the morning and start work all over again." Yeah. She helped me be able to actually go to bed at a regular normal people's time so yeah, I have good work and home life balance now that I've had some really good coaches in my life.

Mike Merrill:

Good for you. So with ARS, tell me, in 2021, what are you excited about? What's next? What's new?

Letitia Hanke:

Oh, 2021. What's next is just getting through this pandemic, number one. I'm looking for that. I'm looking forward to getting back at my company, my team, we do quarterly events. So we do team camping trips and bowling nights. So I'm actually really looking forward to being able to do that again with my team, because I hope to just be able to be a family together. I have a really fun speaking engagement coming up for the 2020 Roofer of the Year. That's coming up in Texas in September. Key note speaker, and that's a really big thing for me because I'm actually going to be talking to my peers of roofers around the country. And that is huge for me through all these years to be able to do that. So I'm looking forward to it. I'm very nervous, at the same time, and like I said, just getting through this year is going to be a really great thing and definitely a goal of mine. So yeah, lots of good stuff happening this year, though.

Mike Merrill:

That's exciting. This is ironic, but I was on with our marketing director earlier this morning. We are just signing up for that same event. So I'm planning on speaking as well.

Letitia Hanke:

Well, I will see you there.

Mike Merrill:

Maybe I can give you a post-COVID hug, we'll see.

Letitia Hanke:

That would be so exciting. I do miss hugs.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, me too.

Letitia Hanke:

I'm a hugger. I'm sure the contractors are like, "Wait, she's hugging me. What's happening?"

Mike Merrill:

Right! You're a hugger, a roofer...I see in the back, you're also a drummer. It looks, or somebody is. What's the deal with that?

Letitia Hanke:

Yes. I come from a long line of musicians in my family. I mean, literally since I was nine, I've been playing drums since I was nine. I started off playing the trumpet when I was seven, piano since I was 12. It's definitely my way of getting away. The stress that I endure on a daily basis, my getaway is writing music. Being able to, I play my drums up in church and I've been growing up in the church, playing the drums since I was really young. So it's definitely something that I love to do. And music is a big part of my heart.

Mike Merrill:

Wow. That's awesome. So is that the set that Mike Rowe gave to you?

Letitia Hanke:

The set that Mike Rowe gave to me is actually at the church still, because it's huge. It's a huge kit and I can't fit it in this little room. This is my practice kit. But no, I left it there at the church, the way he presented them to me. So I get to play them when I'm there. So it was a huge surprise. Mike really just made me and my day it was a great thing that happened.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. That was really, that was a tearjerker to watch, actually. I enjoyed watching that too.

Letitia Hanke:

Oh, I cry still. Every time I hand one of my students the tools, because at the end you saw all those tools that he gave to us and now we get to give them to our students from our academy. And it's just, I cry every time. So yeah, it's definitely one of my favorites.

Mike Merrill:

It's awesome. It's a DeWalt tool kit. And it looked, if I remember, it was about \$65,000 worth of tools that he donated to your school?

Letitia Hanke:

Yep. And now they're not having to spend 500, \$600 for tools and it's been really great.

Mike Merrill:

Oh, fantastic. Love to hear that.

Letitia Hanke:

Thank you.

Mike Merrill:

So kind of wrapping up the conversation side of things, I wanted to ask you a few more personal questions. Nothing too crazy.

Letitia Hanke:

Okay.

Mike Merrill:

So in your life, your work-life balance, whatever it is, what's been one of the key differentiators that's helped you find success? I feel you're successful. What do you think?

Letitia Hanke:

Well, prayer. Prayer has gotten me through some of the worst and the best times of my life through this career. But again, earlier I mentioned, I know I said it already, but it's really been all my mentors. It's been having someone to speak to and talk to about the business part and the life part and figuring out how to be able to have that fun and persevered through the best and the worst times.

Here, where I live in Santa Rosa, we've had so many fires, so many huge fires and just different opportunities for us to not persevere through it. And yet we kept getting through it. And my mentors and my coaches have really helped me be able to stay focused. It's just about staying focused and having your mind on the prize. And for me, it's just being able to keep my employees working and helping them take care of their families. And so that's been the greatest thing that I can say right now, is just being able to have my prayer nights and talking, and listening and implementing the things that my coaches tell me to do. So that's been definitely my saving grace.

Mike Merrill:

Ah, good for you. I'm a person of faith and prayers. Very helpful and necessary for me, too.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes. Yes.

Mike Merrill:

I appreciate your sharing that. And really, again, being honest, you don't think of, oh the roofer, what a blessing in my life, but when your roof's leaking and somebody has to fix it, so you can get back to normalcy.

Letitia Hanke:

That is correct.

Mike Merrill:

Fires or-

Letitia Hanke:

Exactly, exactly. Wind storms, the list goes on. Yes. I mean, we come to their rescue and we're there to take care of them and keep them, I say safe and dry. And that's literally what we do. So yeah, we're a very important part of construction, keeping that roof over their heads.

Mike Merrill:

Good for you. Well, speaking of, also another, I guess question that I ask everybody is, what is Letitia's superpower? When you put your cape on.

Letitia Hanke:

Oh my gosh. I think it's my passion. I have to say, I have passion for life, passion for people. That's really, I think that, I know for sure, that's the thing that keeps me going. If you're going to call that my superpower. I genuinely care for others and want to see others succeed. I've had people that have come to my rescue and have helped me through my hard times. And I just to pay that forward. And I think that's really one of the, if you ask my friends and family, they would say that my passion is definitely, I would say my superpower. Because it's what keeps me going and making sure that I can always help others whenever I can. So yeah, I would say that.

Mike Merrill:

You clearly have a kind heart to plug that passion into because that shows also.

Letitia Hanke:

Thank you very much.

Mike Merrill:

All right. So, to wrap up, what would you hope that the listeners come away within our conversation today?

Letitia Hanke:

I've said a lot of stuff. I think the one thing is, and I may have mentioned it earlier, is just, don't be afraid to take chances. In my life the risks and the chances that I've taken to just try it, to give it a shot. What's the worst

that could happen? That's literally what I've been doing through this whole journey. And just listening to my gut and saying, "Okay, this is something that I could do." And I really feel that if you just are willing to take that risk and take that chance, it could turn out to be something absolutely amazing. Absolutely amazing. And I can literally say that's what's happened for me.

Mike Merrill:

Wow. Well, thank you, Letitia. You are such an inspiration and I just appreciate the opportunity to kindle a friendship. I hope we can see each other in September, and get a chance to talk again before that.

Letitia Hanke:

We will, for sure. 100%. I'm looking forward to it.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. In fact, we've talked about this before. We're going to record a second episode about Letitia's foundation called The LIME Foundation.

Letitia Hanke:

Yes, exactly.

Mike Merrill:

So stay tuned for that. We're going to do that next and release that in a second episode so we can focus more on the great work she's doing there.

Letitia Hanke:

Yay, thank you.

Mike Merrill:

All right. Thanks again, Letitia. We'll talk to you again very soon.

Letitia Hanke:

Bye bye. Thank you.

Mike Merrill:

And thank you to the listeners for joining us today on the Mobile Workforce podcast, sponsored by About Time Technologies and WorkMax. If you enjoyed the conversation that Letitia and I had today, please follow us on Instagram, @WorkMax_ and on LinkedIn @ WorkMax. And give us a five-star rating and review on the podcast platform that you listened to this episode on. Those ratings and reviews are very helpful for us to continue to bring valued guests and these valuable conversations, to not only help you improve your business, but improve your life.