

**Mike Merrill:**

Hello, and welcome to the Mobile Workforce Podcast, sponsored by AboutTime Technologies and WorkMax. I'm your host, Mike Merrill. And today we are sitting down for part number two with our dear friend, Letitia Hanke. She's the founder and CEO of ARS Gutters and Roofing and Solar out of Santa Rosa, California. If you haven't listened to the first episode, we would love to have you go ahead and take a listen there and be excited for you to hear some of the great things that Letitia was able to share there. But for today, we want to talk more about your entrepreneurship.

If you haven't listened to part one of mine and Letitia's conversation, I encourage you to give it a listen. We talk about her start in roofing and also advice for up and comers and especially women in construction among other things. So a bit more about Letitia. She's a celebrated entrepreneur who's been featured on Mike Rowe's *Returning The Favor*, *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, and was also named residential contractor of the year for 2020 by Roofing Contractor. Good job. But more importantly for the conversation today, Letitia is the founder of the LIME Foundation and it's a nonprofit organization for young people to learn about the trades and get training in Santa Rosa, California, and discover real-world opportunities in construction. So welcome again, Letitia, let's dive in.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Okay, great. Happy to be back.

**Mike Merrill:**

Thank you. So the construction industry is facing issues with this labor gap. People are busy, there's a lot of work to do, and there's not enough people to do the work. What can you tell us about that and what you're doing?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Well, first of all, I didn't realize that the lack of workforce in construction existed everywhere. I thought it was just here in California. And this was about six years ago when I first started thinking about how we need to bridge this gap and start training young people. And before that, we were already having a hard time finding employees to want to go into roofing. So at first it was just about me. I was just like, I need roofers, how do I find roofers? And then as I just started talking to my fellow contractors, general contractors, painters, they all started saying the same thing. Like, "We can't find workers either. What are we going to do?" And I just said, "Well, how about, if I were to start a nonprofit that trains young people in the trades, would you guys be interested?" And they said yes. And that's really how it all started.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow. And that was in 2015?

**Letitia Hanke:**

2015 is when I started the nonprofit. And it took a couple of years for me to actually develop the program and actually get, because I needed to have contractor buy-in. Back then, a lot of us were like, it costs a lot of money to train a new person, someone who has no experience whatsoever. We would rather hire someone with a bunch of experience and a bunch of attitude than to just train somebody from scratch. So I really needed that buy-in from the contractors and luckily we were all at our desperation point, so it was pretty easy for me to say, "Okay, are you going to be willing to train them from scratch?" And they said yes. And so it worked out very well.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow. So, what all is involved? What are the different components of your nonprofit?

**Letitia Hanke:**

So, the program's called the NextGen Trades Academy. So we're training young people, ages 16 and 24, many just right out of high school or maybe they've dropped out of high school, went back, got their GED, dropped out of college. Just all the ones that are just not sure what they want to do in life. And our class teaches them about all the different trades that, right now we're working with 17 different trades in that industry, and simply introducing them to a career in the trades. That's really all we're doing, is saying, "Hey, here's what roofing is all about, here's what you can make, here's a contractor telling you a little bit about what it entails. If you're afraid of heights, you're probably not going to want to go into roofing. If you don't like going under these houses, you're probably not want to go into plumbing."

So we just introduced to them this new world that literally they've never heard of and letting them know that they can go straight into a career making 17 to \$22 or more an hour, because it depends on what company or what trade you're in. They're starting people at \$25 an hour to start with no experience, just none. And, I didn't know it was going to explode like it did and it did. It just ended up exploding and now we have all these young people learning about these trades and then going straight into a career in construction.

**Mike Merrill:**

That's wonderful. Man, that beats the heck out of the fast food joint down the street, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes. We're talking about that often. Sometimes they're actually working at the fast food joint and taking our class at same time. So, they finish our class, they graduate, they put in their two weeks notice and next thing you know, they're working for a solar company making \$26 an hour. So yeah, it's pretty nice. Yeah, it's really...

**Mike Merrill:**

The more the benefit to the community too, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Oh my gosh. I have to say, especially to our community here in Santa Rosa. In 2017, we experienced a huge fire, the Tubbs fire, and it burned down 5,500 structures here in our town. And, imagine trying to rebuild all those homes when contractors were already busy, they were already busy before those fires. So, what's really helped this community is to have a workforce, to have someone to draw from and train so that way, we can get our rebuilding done faster. So it's been great for the community because we're getting people back into their homes. So, it's very exciting.

**Mike Merrill:**

Well, and I know you're, clearly you're removing barriers from people to have an opportunity. You're creating something that didn't exist before and broadening horizons of somebody who maybe didn't have a direction, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

That's correct. I'm one of them. So I was in college, I mentioned before I think, I was in school and in my junior year I started working for a roofing company. I had just turned 20 years old, I was still in college at the time. Well, by the time I reached my senior year in college, I was in quite a bit of debt because I got student loans to get through college, and I ended up dropping out of college and my senior year, because I ended up getting promoted at the roofing company that I was at. I became the office manager of this business. And now I'm making \$50,000 a year, which was huge back then for me. And I'm just like, finish college or... But like I said, I was in debt. I was 20 something years old and all this debt.

So what we're helping is a lot of these young people that are kind of being taught through life that, you graduate from high school and you go straight to college. Many of them don't want to go to college. They don't want to go, some of them can't afford it, and now we're just saying, "Okay, here's another option for you. If you don't want to do that, here's a great option for you. And now you're not getting into debt and now you're moving directly into a career."

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow. And I would imagine because of obviously your company ARS, you've got an opportunity to hire some of your graduates. Is that right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes, I get first dibs. Really, roofing is not the most, when I asked my students, every class I ask, the first day of class: What industry are you interested in? They usually say electrical. And I think it's just because they just think that's like the best industry to be in and they don't really realize it. But it's so rare that I get them to say roofing. And I remember I've hired four of the graduates and I have one of the graduates with me now and another one moved on to work for a bigger company after working for me for two years. And I remember that that student said roofing the first day in class, and he said roofing the second day, the last day of class, and I literally hired him like on the spot. He was one of our top students in that class, I'm just like, "You're hired."

And it's been great for me because my other, my seasoned, I won't call them my old employees, but my seasoned employees, they're seeing how by hiring someone who's green, we call them green, brand new into the industry, they're able to train them exactly the way we want them to be trained. They're learning the skills the way we want them to learn it. They're not coming in with bad habits. I know many of you listening to this about those bad habits. When we would hire seasoned employees that have been in the industry for 20 years, they think they know everything. You can't teach them anything. I'm just like, "Well, if you're going to work here, you've got to do the work the way we do it because we're certified, we're this and that." And they come in with attitude and stuff. The difference now is we're bringing them in and they're learning quickly, and now we get to train them the way we want them to be trained. And that's a value. And that's what my contractors are seeing. They're just like, "Okay, this is actually working." So it's been great.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah, I'll bet, they're not bringing their shortcuts with them, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Exactly.

**Mike Merrill:**

So, how are you... You talked about one of your students moving on to a different organization. I imagine you're getting feedback from other contractors that are benefiting from this. What are they saying?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Oh my gosh. I think the biggest thing that they've been saying is just that they didn't realize it. A lot of us just didn't want to spend the extra time and the extra money to train someone green, but now they're seeing the value of doing that. And that's why they're referring us to more contractors, they're hiring more of our students. And they're not even thinking about hiring a seasoned person because they know that all they have to do is move up some of the employees that they already have, move them up and then train these people to move them up and that's actually working out better. And it's just been great to actually just seeing more and more and more con... We started off with 11 contractors and now we have 168 in four years.

**Mike Merrill:**

Oh my goodness.

**Letitia Hanke:**

It's working. It's been great.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow, what a blessing and a benefit to... Talk about a win-win win, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes, absolutely. They just needed to see it. Sometimes it was hard for them to see, but as they keep hearing their other contractor friends saying, "Oh yeah, I hired this graduate and now they're running their own crew after a year." And that's all it takes for them to actually see that as happening and working and now they're going for it.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow, that's incredible. So, the LIME Foundation is primarily in the Santa Rosa area, right? Are there organizations like this or have you collaborated with any other institutions to this point?

**Letitia Hanke:**

We are mainly in Sonoma County. So we've actually been able to do the program throughout Sonoma County, and we're in talks right now of down in the Bay Area as well, doing the program in that area, in Santa Clara County and also many other areas like Napa county is a lot of different counties and stuff they've been contacting us about how to bring the program to their location. And for me, I always tell them the same thing that starts with a... I need contractors first, it has to start with a buy-in of contractors that are willing to hire. So that's the process, but yeah, we're definitely working on that expansion for sure.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow. So you've been at this for well, six years since you founded, it sounds like the last three or so plus in action. How many students have gone through this so far?

**Letitia Hanke:**

So we had 185 go through, 142 have graduated from the program. So they actually made it through in graduation, that means that they've got a B at all the classes. They've got to participate, do the homework that we have for them, and then they get certified, the Cal-OSHA, which is a safety certification. They've got to pass that course, it's a 10-hour course. So they do have to take quite a few steps to actually graduate from the program, but they also know what's at the end of that tunnel. They know that they've got this great opportunity.

Most of our students get hired within 30 to 60 days. So, we're now up to 81, as of our last class, we're up to 81% of our students being hired. We had a class where we had 100% of our students that graduated. They were nine students that graduated, 100% of them got hired within 30 days. Contractors were waiting for them. They're like, "When are they graduating? What time?" So, I like that a lot actually, but some of

them are not work eligible. For instance some don't have a driver's license to be able to drive vehicles, so they have to work on getting their driver's license or they're still in high school maybe they're still juniors or seniors and they have to graduate. We do recommend that they graduate first. So once they graduate from the program, then we can get through... Once they graduate from school, then we can get them hired, but we have to make sure that they've graduated first.

**Mike Merrill:**

Wow. What an amazing impact! You must be so proud, honestly.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes. Oh my gosh. It's just my favorite thing. I love it so much and just being so connected to these young people and seeing their journey and just, oh my gosh, it's just so beautiful. It makes me so happy every day to wake up to continue to do what I'm doing, because I just know that I'm helping to change these young lives. So it's really...

**Mike Merrill:**

For generations, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes.

**Mike Merrill:**

You're changing generations.

**Letitia Hanke:**

My goal is to go full circle where one of my graduates starts their own company and then they hire graduates from the class like I am, and I'm this close to that. One of my graduates has been working for a contractor for four years and he's been a journeyman now with him for two years. So he's got another couple years and then he's able to get his own license. And then one of our female students started her own company. Once she graduated from our program, she actually started one of her own companies as well. So she doesn't have an employee yet, but I know she'll pick from our group

when she's ready. So I'm just really looking forward to that day because that's been on my dream board actually, when I first started, that's what I wanted to have happen. So I'm looking forward to that day.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. So, you mentioned a dream board, is that like a vision board or something?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes, my vision board, yes. My vision board is, I look at it every day, it's in my closet and I have to go in there and to get my shoes. And so I get to look at my vision board.

**Mike Merrill:**

It's a good place for it.

**Letitia Hanke:**

I know I'm in there every day, that's where I'm going to look at it and I just get to constantly look at those things that I want to see for my future. And I'm always changing, as I achieve the goals, I put up new ones, but it's just great to be able to see those things come true. And just to keep me going every day, working towards that vision and working towards those goals. It keeps me motivated.

**Mike Merrill:**

Very inspiring. You probably mentioned, you don't want to do roofing anymore, you just want to do more of this right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

I won't say that out loud, but yeah. That's my retirement. My nonprofit is definitely my retirement. If I had a chance to spend the rest of my life helping these young people, I would do it in a heartbeat. So yeah, that's my retirement for sure.

**Mike Merrill:**

Sounds like you're well, on the way. And I know we could use one of these in Utah, I know that. Everybody I know is months out.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yes, months. Months out. Yes, we're working on it.

**Mike Merrill:**

Well, we'll see if we can help plug in a few more contra... We've got a lot of great customers that are larger roofing organizations around the country.

**Letitia Hanke:**

That's wonderful.

**Mike Merrill:**

So I'm hoping, I'll send this episode to many of them, see if we can get some of them to play.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Thank you very much.

**Mike Merrill:**

So, tell me with how this is working out, what, number one is just like you planned it and then maybe what's been a pleasant surprise for you about this so far?

**Letitia Hanke:**

I think, well, I planned out doing this class, helping a few students, but I didn't expect Mike Rowe to contact me about it. That's number one. It's gained this national type, people knowing about it all over the place. I thought I would be confined to little Santa Rosa, Sonoma County. And now from just even that show, people in Kentucky and Florida and Georgia and everywhere, Colorado, even Utah, people contacted us saying, "Hey, how do we get that program here at our place?" And that's what I wasn't expecting. I was not expecting that I could do this program around the country and around the world really. So that makes me super excited to know that I can help so many more people with the model that we've already built and have put together. So yeah, it excites me everyday every time I think about that. So we have a little list of all these other cities and states that people wanting the program and I'm just like, great, let's make it happen.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah, I love it. So we're plugged into our local AGC chapter here in Utah, and they're just finishing, I think our ribbon cutting ceremony will be in probably late June, maybe early July, and they had a huge training facility and over \$4 million of the labor materials for that work donated from the contractors here locally. And it's a safety and a training facility for something very similar to what you're doing, train the trades and get more qualified people ready to enter the workforce because there's such a gap.

**Letitia Hanke:**

And that's funny. So, it's very expensive here in California. So California is very different from other places. So in order for our students to be able to do hands-on training we have to have worker's comp and it's very, very expensive. So we said, okay, we're just going to do this class as an education type piece and without really a lot of hands-on. And it's been great to know that we can do it, just education, education only, and still get them hired. And the contractors are doing all the hands on training. They're there working for them. We thought they'll have an apprenticeship. Nope. They're just hiring them and then training them right then and there. So, that's been nice to not have that expense of that. And then knowing that this is just from education, that we're getting these young people hired for full-time positions. So it's really great. I would love to do some hands-on with them, but it just costs quite a bit over here in California.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah, I can imagine.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yeah.

**Mike Merrill:**

So, for somebody who wants to bring more awareness to the trades and start making an impact in their community, what advice would you have for them?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Well, number one, you can contact me.

**Mike Merrill:**

There you go.

**Letitia Hanke:**

I'll help you do that. But I realized that people may have a passion just like I did to start their own nonprofit and do their own training, which they absolutely should do. But maybe you don't feel like doing all the work because there's a lot of work involved in it. They can contact someone like us or look in their regions where they're located because most likely there is a training program somewhere where you are and you just have to do a tiny bit of research and find it and just get involved in that because it's working and it's working because these are young people that are, they're ready to go right into the workforce. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly okay for them to go straight into the workforce and we just need to be teaching that more out of school, at a young age, that there are other options for them. So I'm working on that right now as we speak.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah, that's very inspiring. Again, I can think of probably 10 podcasts that we've recorded, at least that breached on this topic at some point, and everybody's saying the same thing. There's a gap, there's not enough skilled labor coming out of high school and colleges, people are not going into the trades like they have been in the past and it's a lost art, we need to start figuring out how to foster these young boys and girls, young men and women to get involved.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Yeah, and it's hard to make up the time because we've had this gap for so long I've got employees that are aging out and then I have new ones. You know what I mean?

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah.

**Letitia Hanke:**

It's already there, that gap is already there. So how are we going to make up for that lost time? I still don't

know that answer. I just know that I'm working on it and we need more and more and more people to work on it. And the jobs are there, the opportunities are literally there. We just need to make sure that people know that that opportunity is there, especially our young people. So we can do that, each and every one of us can make that happen. And like I said, feel free to contact me. I would love to help you work your way through it, or if you're interested in our program, figure out how to have it there.

**Mike Merrill:**

So, what's been your secret? You mentioned earlier that they could start their own, or if they didn't want to do the work, they could call you, but everybody has good ideas. It's not hard to come up with a good idea, but the execution is where the challenge is. What's been your secret sauce to help you do that?

**Letitia Hanke:**

My team. Oh my gosh, I literally surrounded myself with some of the most magnificent people. I knew I couldn't do this on my own. Yes, I always have ideas. There's always that idea, but to really truly implement that idea, you've got to have a great team around you. So number one, my roofing team, they're so amazing that it gives me that free time to actually be able to spend over here on the non-profit. So they run that company, they make sure everything is going nice and smoothly, so I can have that extra time. So, that's number one.

But then if you're going to start a nonprofit, that's a whole other business. They call it a nonprofit but I'm telling you it's a whole other business. So, I have a great team over there as well, that they believe in the vision they believe and they have the passion. Remember, I was mentioning that earlier, they share that passion. And so it just makes it that much easier to make it happen. And they want to see it grow, they want to see it build they're experiencing firsthand what it's like for these young people. Luckily we stay in touch with a lot of them. So we get to really hear their stories and see how it's changed their lives. And that's all we really need to hear is, why don't you students tell us how much this changed their lives and that's it for us. So yeah, surrounding yourself with the right people, you can make it happen. That's all you need.

**Mike Merrill:**

Yeah. Which to me, when you say that, I'm thinking people that you can trust and that also trust you, right?

**Letitia Hanke:**

That's correct. You need to be able to trust them. And you want to make sure that they're the right people for the job and how it, it's just how much dedication, how they dedicate themselves to it. And I have luckily found some of the best people I feel in the entire world. So, I'm very blessed, again, very lucky, very blessed to have great people that I'm surrounded by. And your family, my husband, my son, you've got to have good people, my parents. They're all just great security for me and making sure that they are supporting me in every way, because yeah, it's a lot of time away from your family and your loved ones when you're building something like this and just to get their buy-in and their understanding of how I'm trying to change the world. They're like, "Go change the world, we're here. And so, that means the world to me.

**Mike Merrill:**

I love that. Well, you're clearly an inspiration and you are to me, but to many others as well, and I can see why.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Thank you.

**Mike Merrill:**

So speaking of that, who inspired you?

**Letitia Hanke:**

My mom. Oh my God. I'm not going to cry? Let's turn this off. My mom, oh my gosh, she means so many sacrifices for me and for my brother. And she's so smart. And there were things that, and my dad, he's been in construction, he's a pipe fitter, retired pipe fitter. So construction's literally been in my brain for years, as they've just brought me up such the right way in life about just having morals and believing in prayer and God and how I can make and change the world if I really want to do it. And my mom, the sacrifice that she made for her career to have me and my

brother instead, those are the things that I'm just like, I appreciate that she gave up those things for me and now I get to do the things that she wanted to do in life. And she just really wanted to help others as well. So my parents inspire me every day and my kiddo, my son is a huge inspiration to me as well. So yeah, my family.

**Mike Merrill:**

All about family. That's wonderful. Well, you deserve all the goodness you can get your hands on.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Thank you.

**Mike Merrill:**

Thank you so much for joining us today. I sure enjoyed this conversation, Letitia.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Me too.

**Mike Merrill:**

How do people get involved? If they want to donate or get involved with the LIME Foundation, what can they do to help?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Well, we surely can't do this for free, so donations are great. We are a nonprofit, we're a 501(c)(3), so there's mentorship that's available. Even if you're out of area, you're still able to be a mentor if you're a contractor, so you can get ahold of us for that. And also donations are always welcome. We need to pay for those tools when we run out of the ones that were donated, we need their uniforms, just the instructors to go through the program. And we're talking donations from \$5 to \$50 to \$5,000. Everything matters. You'd go to our website, the limefoundation.org and LIME is linen-lime and Lime is my son's name spelled backwards. My son's name is Emil, E-M-I-L. And that's how it became the LIME Foundation.

From my story of when I was younger, I was bullied. I grew up in an area that was predominantly white, and

I was pretty much one of six black students in the whole school. So I was severely bullied. And so LIME Foundation kind of came out of what I went through as a kid. And my son started experiencing racism when he was about seven years old. And I started talking to him about what I went through as well, and how music is what really helped me get through those bad times. So you may not know, but part of LIME Foundation is also an arts and music program for disadvantaged youth that have gone through really hard times in their lives. And so when I wanted to name my non-profit something that meant the world to me, it was my son's name spelled backwards because kids used to bully him and tease him and call him lime and names.

And so LIME is something that makes me always remember how important it is to be able to help others and to get people through their hard times in life. So LIME Foundation, at the limefoundation.org, you can see all of our videos, you can donate to us and help us and connect us with other contractors and people that just want to change lives.

**Mike Merrill:**

Beautiful, Letitia. Sure appreciate it. And there you are owning it again. You just keep owning stuff, don't you?

**Letitia Hanke:**

Thank you so much for this opportunity. And hopefully someone will make contact with me.

**Mike Merrill:**

They will. I'm going to make sure of it. But we really appreciate the opportunity to shine a light on these important topics and your inspiring and incredible story of perseverance.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Thank you. Thank you so much.

**Mike Merrill:**

All right, well, we'll have to do it again down the road and check in on your progress, if that's okay.

**Letitia Hanke:**

Thank you so much.

**Mike Merrill:**

Great. Thank you. And thank you to listeners for joining Letitia and I today for our important conversation, we appreciate your listenership and we're excited to bring you these great conversations and especially talk about things that are so important, our industry and the LIME Foundation and all these great and important details about how we can all dig in and help improve our industry. Again, our goal, the podcast is to bring you valuable conversations that can help you not only improve your business, but also your life.