



Mike Merrill:

Hello, and welcome to The Mobile Workforce Podcast. I'm your host, Mike Merrill, and today, we are sitting down again for episode and discussion number two with Robin Thorne. Robin is a President and CEO of CTI, a chemical engineering firm who provides project management, environmental safety and compliance, and also construction management services. Robin is also the founder of DemoChicks, which we're going to talk about on today's episode.

What DemoChicks is is a nonprofit organization that introduces girls to non-traditional careers. In the last episode, Robin and I talked about the transition from paper to the cloud and how Robin's small team is making that transition. Today, we're going to focus more on Robin's personal story of her nonprofit organization, DemoChicks and how to get involved in the construction community and also help make changes for the better. Hello, Robin. Thanks again for joining us for another episode.

Robin Thorne:

Hello. Thanks for having me back. I must have said something right the first time.

Mike Merrill:

Yep. You did. You said a lot of things right, so it was a necessary must to have you back. All right, so one of the things that we felt was important to have you back on to share was I think there's a great importance of having involvement from women in the construction industry today. There's a huge labor gap. There are lots of companies that don't have enough people and resources in play to complete the work that they have, and we feel strongly and I've talked to many others who believe that women can help fill many of these roles in this currently male-dominated industry. What, I guess, do you think that people can do to be helpful in moving the needle and getting more women involved in the construction workplace?

Robin Thorne:

I believe there are many obstacles that have to be overcome in order for women to continue to enter into the non-traditional careers and enter into construction. Why I say continue is because I'm there and there's other women who I know in the L.A. area who are in construction, but there are some obstacles to overcome and some challenges. Some of them that I faced early in my career was just the respect level, so you have to be confident in who you are and know who you are. That wasn't a problem for me initially, but just that the respect level, I've gone into rooms where I've been ignored because the assumption is that I wasn't the person in charge, but I was. It was my project. Or having a seat at the table with the client and being ignored.

You know, I've had situations where the client didn't talk to me. They talked to the person who was with me when clearly it was my project. Those are some of the challenges that we have, or just not being given the opportunities to participate on some of the projects. I think that what would be helpful, if we didn't see men or women. If we just saw professionals, so when we walk in the room, when we sit at the table, we're all professionals. We're at the table, so we've earned that spot. Whether you are a man or a woman, you're at the table as a professional and ready to talk about the deal or do the deal.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. I love that. We're imperfect human beings working with other imperfect human beings, and sorry you're going through those experiences. That's sad to hear that in this day and age that those things still happen, but we certainly know that they do and I appreciate you being willing to come on and talk about that and share your experience. What do you think that the men that are listening can do to be helpful and to help remedy some of these challenges that you've experienced and that clearly others have as well?

Robin Thorne:

I think be more supportive. Just understand that we're just as qualified. You know, I have a chemical engineering degree from Drexel University, so the guy who sat next to me, I have the same degree that he has and I've worked in industry for over 20 years. That person next to me who's worked for over 20 years, we both bring the same thing to the table. Actually, women are a little more creative. You know that book Women Are From... Men Are From... The Mars and Venus Book?

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus. Yes.

Robin Thorne:

Right. So I think that we have a little more creativity because we know the different shades of blue. Men probably say it's blue. We'll say it's baby blue, it's royal blue. We have that creative thing going on a little more insight and I think we add a little more to the conversation. It's great to have a woman on a team. There's some statistics, I don't remember them exactly, that talk about the value of women being on a team and how teams are more success when you have a woman there because it's just someone who's thinking differently, thinking outside the box.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. I think most people would agree, for sure, that different perspectives can often and typically bring greater value, so it's not just one approach, one view. I know for me, for sure, I always value my wife's opinion and she's more than happy to remind me when I'm out of line, and I think that's great. It's a blessing to have that help.

Tell me this. Really, I think one of the other interesting things about you is that not only have you gone through those types of experiences and learned from them and obviously grown past them because you continue to thrive. You took things a step further. You didn't just stop there and say, "Well, I'm going to make this business even more successful to show those people just how smart I really am," but you actually did something with a nonprofit that you call DemoChicks. Can you tell us a little bit more about that story?

Robin Thorne:

All right. I love talking about DemoChicks. CTI, my day job, we had an opportunity to knock down a federal prison, demolish a federal prison out in the middle of the desert, Boron, California. The prison had been closed for 20 years and there were about 122 structures, single-story buildings, two-story buildings, and aboveground storage tanks. Summer of 2018, we were contracted to demolish the prison, and what I realized being out on site like before we could demolish the prison, we had to obtain a contract. That's when I realized this is a curriculum that we can actually teach. You have the procurement piece, that's the accounting. Then, we had to look at the surveys. They're letting asbestos surveys because they were 20 years old, so we had to do an assessment. After the assessment, we abated. We got rid of the lead and asbestos.

Then, we had to demolish the buildings, and after you demolish the buildings, you have to separate the materials, like the concrete from the steel, the asphalt because all of it can't just go in the trash, so you have to recycle some. Then, even after recycling, when you're doing a disposal, you have to identify where the materials could go, and then there's the transportation. I thought, "Wow, this is incredible. Who knows about the demolition industry?" We're not getting more land, so for anything to go up, things have to come down. Demolition in itself is a whole industry. As I've talked about that project with people, I realized that when people think about demolition, they think about a wrecking ball. Although our image is a wrecking ball, I have not yet swung a wrecking ball.

You know, we use excavators to do the demolition, and so I thought, "Wow, this is something that we can share with others and there's a whole lot more to this story, but as a result of that, DemoChicks was born."

Mike Merrill:

That's fascinating. What a great deal of insight and vision you had to actually put that together in your mind and recognize that you were in the middle of something special and that could become something so much greater, so props to you. When you talk about DemoChicks, is it a mentoring and training community? Or what does that look like? What age ranges, et cetera?

Robin Thorne:

We have something for people of all ages. We did some research and we found that high school is too late to introduce girls to non-traditional careers. One of the challenges with engineering is that people aren't able to do math, so we have to introduce the concept to them early on, so we figured elementary school. I thought middle, but my team said, "No, that's too late. Elementary school because they're starting to form their ideas and the direction they want to go in. We have an online program for K-8 students. It's done through Zoom. We started with in-person classes like hands-on workshops in person. Then, the pandemic hit, so we've been on Zoom... This is actually our second semester where we have online workshops where we... Say like if it's an architecture workshop, we have a professional who talks about architecture.

Then, we have a Cahoot, like a little test for them to see how much they learn. Then, they actually get a hands-on experiment with architecture. With architecture, it's marshmallows and toothpicks, and so they create the structures online. Then, we also have a program for college students. It's the mentoring program, so women in the industry are mentoring girls who college age through like the first three years of their career, so that's the mentoring program. Then, we also have scholarships, so as a young nonprofit, we've given away 12 scholarships to college students over the last two years, so I'm really proud of that.

Mike Merrill:

Wow. That's amazing that you thought through it to that degree that you started on the low end and you have everything all the way up through.

Robin Thorne:

Well, that's because I couldn't make up my mind. I was like, "We can just help everybody," and we've had some women who have said, "Oh, we can do happy hour and get together as a group." That's why we say, "We empower, we elevate. and we enlighten, right? We say "We introduce girls to non-traditional careers and empower the women who are in them because everybody loves DemoChicks. When people see the image, they get excited, and even some older, more seasoned women, they're like, "I'll knock something

down." I'm thinking, "We're going to have a fitness program soon."

Mike Merrill:

That's funny. That's awesome. What are some of the workshops like for these young girls and young ladies?

Robin Thorne:

Well, I mentioned the architecture. We we've done one, believe it or not, geotechnical, and so they had some sand, some rocks and some dirt, and a bottle of water. They built the berm and then they pour the water on and that teaches them about erosion. We've had... Our most recent workshop was a wrecking ball where the girls were able to build a wrecking ball using cups, a straw, and some tape, and either an orange or a ball depending on what they had at home.

What's exciting about this is the girls are sitting at their kitchen table with a laptop. Sometimes I see the image and I'm like, "Well, we can be a little more sophisticated," but it's grassroots. I mean, they're there. We're there, we have membership and we send the supplies to the members, but people who just register online, we give them a list of supplies to buy. We've had workshops that talked about static electricity with the balloon, they rub the balloon and they see how it can stick to the things. We've had one, one of the programs I wrote out this school year was architecture.

We did the marshmallows and toothpicks, but then we had some landscape architecture. We actually had a landscape architect come one and it was architecture. We did the marshmallows and toothpicks, but then we had landscape architecture. We actually had a landscape architect come on and it was so exciting because she talked about the community around them. Where would they put the shopping mall? Where would they put the park? You know, those types of things. We also had interior design and the girls were able to design their own homes.

Just really exciting workshops and to see how engaged they are online is pretty amazing. I think that's another reason why it's K-8 because they're the ones whose parents are going to say, "Let's get in front of the computer and do this workshop." We're really looking forward to when we can reengage because we want to get

the high school girls and maybe take them out to project sites so that they can see construction in action. Won't get them too close, but-

Mike Merrill:

Well, that's fantastic. You're serving what areas right now? Where is this available for the listeners to tap into if they know young women or young girls that are interested in this type of a program?

Robin Thorne:

Well, because we're online, we're serving all areas. We've had people call in... Well, the in-person workshops actually started in Philadelphia, but because we're online, we've had people call in from Puerto Rico, even Nigeria we had some folks who were on the line one time, so that's really exciting. Right now, it's wherever they are with the computer. They're the fourth Thursday of the month at... Now, it's at 4:00 PM, so just depending on the time zone and specific time. Depending on the time zone, we'll determine if somebody wants to chime in because Nigeria, I believe they were nine hours ahead, so they planned that out to be a part of our group.

Mike Merrill:

Wow, so are you segmenting these groups by age? Or is there a way to speak or teach these groups differently? Or are they all on the same program?

Robin Thorne:

Well, when we started out, we said, "Well, if we get older students, we'll put them in a room," because on Zoom you have different rooms, but we found we would get an older student every now and then. We found that K-8 is who was getting on the line, and we decided. Then, you have to do something, when you're committing to a program. You say, "Oh, we do it all." We decided that our online programming is for K-8.

That was hard for me to say because I kept, "Well, no, you know the high school girl, we can still find a room." No K-8 online and we just launched so Long Beach Unified School district, they have a female leadership academy, so we just signed up two classrooms. We're going to provide online workshops for them specifically.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah, it really is. Obviously, some of this can't be free I'm sure. I mean, there's expenses and costs. Is this something that you're funding on your own? Or what does that look like in the future for your goals for growth?

Robin Thorne:

Well, initially for the most part, I funded on my own because I said, "We're going to do the work." What I'm good at is connecting with people and I'm a doer, so I get the work done. I have a board and I said, "Well, it's your job to figure out how to bring in the money, but I'm going to do the work." We have had a couple of events where we honored women and donations came in, so we partially funded by those organizations.

That was really exciting, too, because the launch of DemoChicks, I was celebrating 10 years in business, so I had a 10-year birthday party for CTI and we honored five women who are in non-traditional careers. That was our first launch. We honored five women and then we provided five scholarships. Then, the second year pandemic, but then in last year, we had another event and was more successful in raising funds. We honored four women along with Long Beach Community College for their program and we awarded six scholarships.

These workshops that I'm telling you about, we're pretty much self-funding the ones for the schools. The online workshops, people can sign up for free. There's a whole list. They can sign up for free. They can make a \$10 donation, \$20 donation, or they can just pay a hundred bucks for the year, so it covers the cost. We are definitely looking for funders to help us to continue this work. My thing is we're going to do the work at the level that we can do it until we can do more.

Mike Merrill:

Wow. What a noble and amazing cause. I think it's much needed and with everything else going on in not just the industry, but society in general, we're having to get more creative to keep some of these barriers from stopping our production and stopping our progress as a community. Not just as a construction organization or a construction industry, but if there's no roads or highways or bridges or airports, nobody else in the world can function either. It's a great service

that you're providing and really inspiring that you're digging so deep to make a difference, even at that level of these young girls who now have something fun and exciting to look forward to.

Robin Thorne:

Absolutely, and we actually expect that DemoChicks would be a household name. We want coloring books and counting, and it's funny because the whole counting piece, because I'm not an educator or a writer, so I was like, "One screw driver, two saws," and I know there's more to a book than that, but we want to introduce the images to them to get them curious about, "Well, what's this? Books about trucks aren't just for boys, so I'm just envisioning having a couple books, alphabet, counting, a puzzle.

Mike Merrill:

Sure. Those that are listening that are intrigued with this, how can they get involved or plug into some of what you're doing or help promote more of it or, or even have their own children join in? What resources are out there that they can tap into?

Robin Thorne:

Well, of course, they can follow us on social media. We're on Instagram and Facebook and that's DemoChicks, D-E-M-O-C-H-I-C-K-S. Also, if they go to our website, which is demochicks.org, they can sign up for our workshops and see all of the other programs that we're rolling out.

Mike Merrill:

That's amazing. Do you have some case studies or testimonials from some young ladies or girls or women that have been placed in the workforce that have started to plug some of this into their professional life?

Robin Thorne:

We have testimonials from college students who have received scholarships and we tend to capture... Like on last week with the workshop, if a parent says, "Oh, my daughter loved it. It's the best thing." We take... I say, "Grab it and post it somewhere," but we are at the beginning stage. We're building and growing, but

everything that you are you're saying is something that we're working towards, but everyone loves DemoChicks. I mean, the people that we come in contact with, they just fall in love with us because we're doing great work. I'm just looking forward to see where we are in a few years, the impact that we're having.

Mike Merrill:

Yeah. It's an amazing grassroots effort that you're putting forward and we certainly love hearing about these great and inspiring stories and hope that our reach can help bring awareness and get this conversation going in other groups and hopefully help to shine a brighter light on on this great work you're doing. Loved having you on again, of course, for this second episode. It's been a lot of fun. Before we go, what's a takeaway that you would love the listeners to have from our conversation here?

Robin Thorne:

That the sky's the limit. All things are possible if you're willing to work for it. You can achieve it. You're willing to work hard enough, smart enough, you can achieve anything you set out to do. I think that's really important that people know that and to get involved. We would love to see people get involved. If there are women who are in non-traditional careers, we need you as mentors. We need for you to be an example. One of the things that we often say at DemoChicks is see it be it. If people can see it, then they know they can be it because there's a living example, so we encourage people to get involved and to get involved at the level that you can.

Someone may not go all-in as I've done because it's just how I'm wired, but what is the one thing that the person can do? Whether it's could be writing a check because there's some areas that's like, "No, I'm not doing that. I'll just write a check." It may be writing a check or it may be signing up for a workshop or. what is it that you can do? Do the one thing that you can do, and that's in all areas, not just for DemoChicks, but just in your life, for the world. What's the one thing that you can do to make a difference?

Mike Merrill:

Oh, that's fantastic. Very inspiring. Before we wrap up today, what would you say is your superpower?

Robin Thorne:

I'd say my superpower is compassion, and the reason why it's a superpower because if it wasn't for the compassion that I have for others, I wouldn't do the work that I do because oftentimes working in a nonprofit capacity, we may not feel like a lot of appreciation, but I'm not concerned about appreciation. My concern is about getting the message out, taking care of the young ladies and the women who are in the field. My concern is more about people and caring for the people, so I would say compassion is my superpower.

Mike Merrill:

I love that. What a great response. Well, thank you again for joining us today. Had a lot of fun on this second discussion and conversation. I hope you enjoyed it as well and I know that our listeners most certainly will also.

Robin Thorne:

Well, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

Mike Merrill:

All right. We'll talk again soon, Robin. Take care.