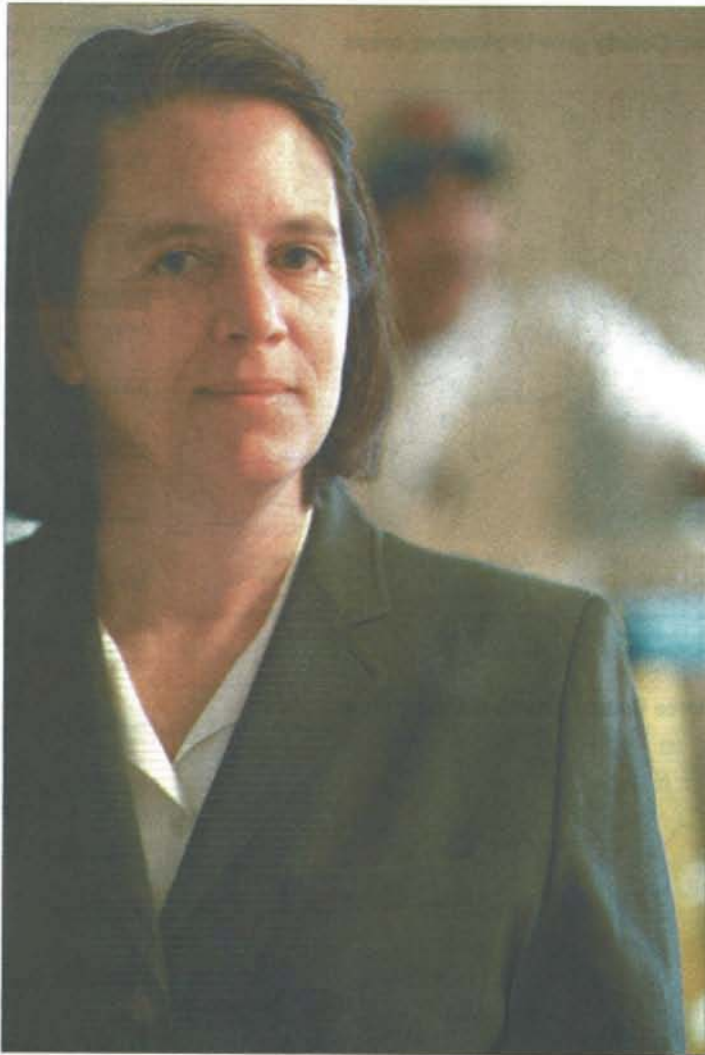


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THE SEATTLE TIMES SECTION E SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1999



EUSTACIO HUMPHREY / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Martha Rose began her career as a laborer in the 1970s with some advice from a friend's mother: "Get a trade that pays a man's wage." Today Rose, 46, is a Seattle homebuilder.

A woman's touch



The atrium of Rose's townhome project along busy 15th Avenue Northwest in Ballard.

Female builders are still a rarity, but they're bringing some different ideas to construction

By BILL KOSSEN
Seattle Times staff reporter

Martha Rose was a pioneer when she began working as a laborer on construction sites in the early 1970s. There weren't many other women doing that, so she felt she was being watched especially close.

"A lot of guys said 'Don't work so hard because you'll make us look bad,'" she said.

Today, she's a different kind of pioneer, building townhomes (ranging in price from \$229,000 to \$259,000) on a noisy, ragged stretch of 15th Avenue Northwest in Ballard.

The confidence she had to rise through the ranks of a male-dominated trade has also given her the feeling that she can succeed with her latest venture.

While other builders have succeeded by putting in high-quality new houses, condos and apartments in rundown neighborhoods, Rose is taking it the next step — putting her pro-

jects on a busy, four-lane arterial. (One in the 7000 block of 15th Avenue Northwest and the other two blocks north and across the street.)

It's a reflection of how the lack of buildable land in the Seattle area is forcing homebuilders to develop sites that for years were used mostly for stores, offices or inexpensive apartments.

But it's also a reflection of how the building industry is slowly changing for women. Rose, 46, the owner of M. Rose Construction and Development, doesn't see herself as a role model, but there are few others like her.

"I don't personally know any others," she said.

Karen Anderson-Bittenbender is a vice president of Intracorp, a Seattle-based developer of large condo and apartment projects.

When asked if she knew of any other female builders, people who run their own general contracting firms, she said, "I can't think of any."

"I go to meetings and I'm the only woman there."

The 2,500-member Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish counties doesn't break down its membership by gender, but spokeswoman Karen Smaalders said there are very few female builders.

"There are a lot of husband-and-wife teams, but typically the husband will be the builder," she said, but added that there are "quite a few women remodelers."

Anderson-Bittenbender said there are a number of female subcontractors, but women at the top are unusual. And working her way up from laborer makes Rose especially rare, as Anderson-Bittenbender, who began her career as a so-called worker involved in nonprofit housing programs.

No figures are kept on how many women actually run their own construction companies, but according to the

PLEASE SEE **Women** ON

Women homebuilders are rare, but they bring a new perspective

WOMEN

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Department of Labor, only 2 percent of everyone working in "construction trades" in 1998 were women, while the figure for construction laborers was 4.5 percent.

"It hasn't been a pleasant experience for women," said Anderson-Bittenbender, who said that work sites traditionally were places where the language and other things, such as calendars of nude women, could make female workers uncomfortable.

"We don't allow that," she said, noting that the company also has a three-day diversity workshop.

She added that her company has worked to give women more opportunities. Three of six project managers are women, she said, and more doors are opening in other areas too.

She said she's seeing more female laborers, electricians and heavy-equipment operators.

At Seattle Community College, of the 1,038 students enrolled in the 1998-99 school year in the building/construction program, nearly 13 percent, or 130, were women, according to spokeswoman Patricia Paquette.

In the University of Washington's Construction Management program, the percentage is the same — 76 men and 11 women, or 13 percent.

That, however, is the same as it was in 1983, the earliest figures available, when there were 87 men and 13 women in the program, said Tim Washburn, the UW's director of admissions and records.

Rose said it wasn't hard for her to get her first job 27 years ago because the newspapers were full of ads seeking laborers during a building boom in the Washington, D.C., area, making it difficult for an employer to say no help was needed. But she said

she had to move on after six months because her first employer wouldn't give her a raise.

Why did she become a carpenter?

"Carpentry was a real glamour trade in the '70s," she said. "I liked working with my hands. I enjoyed the hard work and getting strong." Working as a framer and a roofer "Looked fun to me."

And the mother of a boyfriend, who raised seven children on her own, once told her: "Get a trade that pays a man's wage."

After a couple of decades, carpentry can take a toll on a back and lose its glamour, she said, so that is why Rose decided to become a builder, putting her money on the line and hiring others to do the work.

Now she's really putting her money on the line. The two townhome projects rise high above the street on narrow 50-foot-wide lots. Surrounding them are a collection of old houses, businesses and parking lots.

The four-lane arterial is busy with the traffic of cars, trucks and buses, but Rose has designed the four-unit, four-story buildings to muffle the sound as much as possible and take

advantage of the views.

The bottom floor is for office or retail space, while the top three floors are home to the 1,400-square-foot units, which have two bedrooms and two baths.

From the back units, with balconies facing the side streets, the sounds of birds chirping in the trees are louder than the traffic. And one can see much of Seattle, Elliott Bay and the mountains on a clear day.

"I hope the views will offset the noise," she said.

The noise gets louder in the front, lower-priced units, but the double-pane windows help muffle the sound. And there should be little noise from neighboring apartments, because the two in front share one double wall and are separated from the two in the rear by a large atrium, open space required by the city building code in a mixed-use project.

The bottom floor in one building will be a studio for her concrete countertop business and in the other building, a locksmith has rented space.

Rose feels she already is cleaning up the neighborhood. She said the building in the 7000 block was formerly the site of "a shabby, old house" and a metal garage.

"It was the junkiest lot on the block. I didn't get any grumbling from the neighbors."

The new building towers above its neighbors — which includes some old buildings and a bar across the street — allowing residents to take in the panoramic views above the street.

"I hope it is viewed not as an eyesore, but as an up-and-coming area," Rose said, looking out on the street from the balcony of a back unit.

She said she could have played it safe and been like other builders who prefer to follow the leader, mimick-

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MARTHA ROSE

*Seattle homebuilder,
on her days as a laborer*

ing what's proved to be successful. The problem with that, she said, is that what is successful one day may not be the next. So as she did when she first became a laborer 27 years ago, Rose is carving her own path.

She said she's been told by some real-estate people that she's being too risky.

"Maybe I am," she said. "But I like to keep ahead of the pack."

Seattle Times researcher Vince Kueter contributed to this report.

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