



At bottom, Ann Bruner, who is having her home renovated, consults with Martha Rose.

Chien-Chi Chang / Seattle Times

Profile

MARTHA ROSE

Contractor has got framework of her firm nailed down

by Fara Warner
Times business reporter



Although Martha Rose rarely wears her carpenter's belt anymore, she can be called upon anytime to wrestle a ceiling beam into place or pound in a few finishing nails at a construction site.

Rose owns Martha Rose Construction, a general contracting company that uses a platoon of subcontractors from framers to drywallers to renovate homes, to construct apartment buildings and to develop retail sites.

Subcontractors do most of physical work; Rose controls the budgets, construction schedules and design decisions.

■ **Name:** Martha Rose
 ■ **Age:** 37
 ■ **Position:** President, Martha Rose Construction
 ■ **Quote:** "When I first started, there was a tendency to not trust that I could do a job because I was woman. But they realized I didn't have a chip on my shoulder. All I wanted was to offer people a better deal, which led to more opportunities for work."

"She speaks all the languages, she knows how fast her framers can

frame and when she will need drywallers," said Ann Bruner, owner of one of two Fremont homes Rose is renovating.

Rose also is working on a retail site in Queen Anne. She works as long as 17 hours a day and raises a son, but she is content with the freedom that owning her own business has given her.

"I wanted a business that would pay me enough to be a single parent," Rose said amid the pounding of nails and the whir of a generator at the Fremont project.

With pen and pad in hand, Rose walked quickly through the home, stepping over two-by-fours and taking notes. She is deciding when to buy sheetrock.

She takes advice from her framer, Rich Carlson. She jokes with him, then tells him what she wants and when, knowing that she is in control of the situation.

"Really, I love my subs," Rose said as she stepped down a new cedar stairway. "My son says that if we ever went on vacation, I'd have to take them with me."

During most months, she may have four to six projects in various stages with five to 10 subcontractors moving from site to site.

One of her most notable projects was the renovation of City People's Mercantile on 15th Avenue. Harley Broe, a partner in the hardware store, said people who passed the store every day stopped to see what company had taken over City People's. The change was that dramatic, Broe said.

At 37, Rose has worked in construction more than half of her life. "I spent 10 years pounding nails," she said.

Rose's interest in construction began in high school. "I think it started when I decided not to take typing," she said. She worked in an office for a year after graduating, just to confirm that clerical work was not something she wanted to do.

"A friend encouraged me to get a job where I'd be getting a 'man's wage' as she called it. She told me to find an occupation that paid appropriately and that I could support a family on," Rose said.

Her first job was installing moldings at a 200-unit apartment building for a company called Pinewood Grains near Washington, D.C. During the next 10 years, she moved around the country and finally settled in Seattle.

One of her first projects here was working as a union carpenter on the West Seattle bridge. Rose then became a building inspector for the area north of Lake Union and west of Aurora Boulevard.

Then she decided she wanted to be her own boss. Rose started her business as a free-lance general contractor, helping other construction companies work through phases of their projects.

About four years ago, Rose started working on jobs by herself, taking them from start to finish. She built a corps of subcontractors that she now uses on virtually every job.

"When I first started, there was a tendency to not trust that I could do a job because I was woman. But they realized I didn't have a chip on my shoulder. All I wanted was to offer people a better deal, which led to more opportunities for work," she said.

Jerry Jobes, who owns Quantum Electronics and has worked with contractors in the Seattle area for 12 years, considers Rose a good construction manager. "She doesn't dictate what she wants. She discusses the job with you and the owner," he said.

For people like Ann Bruner, the owner of a 65-year-old Fremont home that Rose is renovating, Rose fills a niche that doesn't interest some other contractors.

"I thought our job was too little to tempt her," Bruner said.

For Rose, it's not a matter of size, but how much a person wants to spend. Rose works for an hourly wage, instead of tacking on a percentage to the total budget of the contract.

Most general contractors operate in one of two ways. One is the hard bid where contractors come up with a cost estimate in competitive bidding. The other way is the cost-plus system: A contractor calculates all the costs, then marks up that price by a negotiated percentage, usually about 20 percent.

Rose takes a more flexible approach. She and the owner work out a budget before construction begins. "Usually the owner has a preconceived idea of what they want to spend," she said.

Within a budget, Rose determines what she can do. Bruner's budget is \$75,000. Although Rose said it will be tight to achieve what Bruner wants with that amount, she's committed to doing it for that price.

"I think this way removes a lot of the financial tension for the owner. There is more discussion of what is happening. They get the big picture early on," she said.

The owner pays all the bills with Rose overseeing the construction. She is almost like a subcontractor to the owner, who retains greater control over the job than with most contractors.

Rose probably could make more money following a traditional way of contracting, but she says she believes her approach is a selling feature.

"I don't want to bid, because I think I'll give the best deal around," she said. "On the other hand, I don't want there to be any discussion over whether I'm getting too much."

The owner remains in control of the budget. Rose won't make changes to the budget unless the owner wants extra work or unless an emergency arises.

Rose said she doesn't think this kind of arrangement works for everyone. "There has to be a great deal of mutual respect in the way I do business."

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