

The Construction User 2.0 - Episode 26: NAWIC's Mission - A discussion with Joelle Salerno & Danielle Harshman

Kirk: Today, we have two awesome guests. Joelle Salerno is the Assistant Executive Director for the Western Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association or NECA. With a strong background in government affairs as a formal congressional staffer, Joelle facilitates and supports innovative change in the areas of emerging markets, workforce development, state level legislation, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Our other guest is Danielle Harshman. She is the Executive Director of the Ironworkers Employer Association in Western Pennsylvania, and she's also the Vice Chair for TAUC's Local Employer Organization Committee. As the former Director of Marketing for Ironworker Local No. 3, she has first hand perspective of both labor and management and the many hurdles faced by both.

Both of our guests are members of the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association of Women in Construction, and that important conversation is what we're here to talk about today. Please help me welcome Joelle Salerno and Danielle Harshman.

Joelle and Danielle, thank you so much for joining us today here on the Construction User 2.0.

Joelle: Thanks for having us, Kirk.

Danielle: Yeah, thank you.

Kirk: I don't know if you've listened to the podcast before, but I always try to open it up with a ridiculous question to get it started and keep it conversational. Joelle, you first. What is the last song you had stuck in your head?

Joelle: The last song I had stuck in my head? It was probably Invisible String by Taylor Swift.

Kirk: It's a solid option, really.

Joelle: Really, it's an earworm for sure.

Kirk: It absolutely is. How about you, Danielle? Last song that you just couldn't break free from?

The Construction User 2.0

Danielle: Let's see. There are a few. We're going to sound like total Swifties because I would say Shake It Off. I think maybe it's because of all the things happening over the weekend, and that's one of my daughter's favorites.

Kirk: For the record, there's nothing wrong with being a Swiftie. I'm a fan myself. Did we watch the Super Bowl?

Joelle: Yes. We're from Pittsburgh, so we're bred to watch football, so yeah.

Kirk: Kicking off today, we're talking about NAWIC. Let's hear about it. Tell me about the mission of NAWIC.

Joelle: NAWIC is the National Association of Women in Construction, so it speaks for itself. NAWIC is about supporting women in construction. One of our mantras right now is many paths, one mission. It just demonstrates how many different paths women take to get into the construction industry.

I know Danielle and I have many different routes of getting here. We're very different from the tradeswomen who come in through apprenticeship or other fields, professional positions. There are just so many ways that we all come into the industry. NAWIC is just about supporting all those women where they are and helping them get to where they want to go.

Kirk: Now you've piqued my curiosity. How did you, Joelle, end up in construction? What is your mission? How did you end here or get here?

Joelle: My day job is working for the National Electrical Contractors Association. I'm a chapter assistant director for the Pittsburgh chapter. I came in. I grew up in a union household, so union construction is close to my heart. But my background is in politics and government affairs, so I started out working for a member of Congress. That's where I was working when I came on board with NECA.

Kirk: That's awesome. How about you, Danielle?

Joelle: I started doing government affairs.

Kirk: It makes total sense coming from politics on the hill. Danielle, how did you end up here?

Danielle: Mine's a little bit convoluted. We joke when we talk to some of these people that we run into. Joelle, at least I feel the same because my background is actually in marketing and advertising. That's what I graduated school for.

I went to work for a small ad agency that at the time, once I had been there for a few years, I actually had Ironworkers Local Union No. 3 as a client. I was PMing pretty much that client and

overseeing all their advertising in their media marketing plan, media placement. Then I actually went to work for the local internally.

I ended up doing some of their marketing internally for them after they understood what all I did on the outside of the agency. I worked there for close to nine years, and then this opportunity came up to be the executive director of the Iron Worker Employers Association. Now I represent the contractor side.

I find it interesting because now I got to see both ends of the business as far as labor and management, which is what we do in this role, to keep that relationship going. Mine was advertising. I always say in a prior life, I had to have something else going on, because I love going on a job site and seeing everything built out of nothing. All these projects come to life.

Kirk: That's awesome. That's a special place in my heart for marketers, being one. I love that. That's really cool. How do people get involved with NAWIC? What are the benefits, and how can they help?

Joelle: It definitely depends on the local area where you are. I know there are around 120 NAWIC chapters across the country. Pittsburgh is chapter 161. We have been growing our membership and basically trying to go out there and find women who aren't currently engaged in maybe a future leader's or a women's networking group trying to get them involved, just introducing them to the community, and showing them that they have a community.

One of the biggest draws of the women who are currently involved in NAWIC Pittsburgh is that we try to get together and really create that sense of community and support. We've been trying to do that in creative ways virtually and in-person since Covid. We've been doing our best for that. We also try to provide opportunities to give back.

One of the biggest ways we've been doing that is through Camp NAWIC, which is a girls in construction camp for teen girls over the summer. It's a week-long day camp. This coming year is going to be our second year, and we're really excited about all of those opportunities. We've had so much support from our NAWIC members and from the industry across Pittsburgh.

Kirk: I'm going to ask what will probably sound like a stupid question. We all know what associations do. We know the general understanding, but talk to me a little bit more specifically about NAWIC. Obviously, the National Association of Women in Construction. People can infer a lot about what it is you guys do.

You just gave a great example of Camp NAWIC. Walk me through a little bit more. What are you guys doing? How are we supporting women in construction or advocating for them? What are the programs and projects you guys are doing?

Joelle: We try to do the networking, like I mentioned, as well as professional development. We try to give opportunities for continuing education, different safety opportunities, especially we're working on an event right now. Maybe Danielle can talk a little bit about it, about safety gear and PPE that's designed specifically for women, since that's still a thing that's really hard to come by for a lot of women who need it.

Across the country, there are all different kinds of programs that chapters are putting together to advocate and increase awareness of the needs of women and just give women support for how they can succeed, how they can advocate for themselves, and how they can establish themselves in working in a construction environment.

Kirk: Danielle, it sounds like you've actually been tapped in on this one. I was actually just talking to Kathy Dobson not too terribly long ago about the need for better PPE and stuff for women. I'd love to hear you expand on that.

Danielle: I definitely have Kathy on my list to talk to you about this. We are actually creating a PPE fashion show, if you will.

Kirk: I want to be involved in this so much. Let me know however TAUC can help because that sounds awesome.

Danielle: You're in, for sure. We're planning to host it in the fall. Our goal is, like Joelle had mentioned, to bring about different companies that support women's PPE and how it's a better fit. We talked about recently how OSHA just put out their new information about how it has to be a proper fit. I know so many women that go on the job site and say, these gloves don't fit me, these boots don't fit me, the PPE doesn't fit me.

They just can't get in a small enough size or in an appropriate size, which isn't safe at all. We're trying to work with different vendors so that we can bring some of this PPE that would actually be more apt for women to wear to the fashion show stage, if you will, but not so that we're crazy.

We're still in the construction industry. It goes along with trying to bring about for women who were not saying, hey, look at us, we're different, we need this, we demand this. If you want us to do these jobs and these roles, and you want us to be safe and follow the OSHA regs, then it does need to come down to people looking at it in a different way than they have it before.

I used to run into different ironworkers that would say, I have a really hard time finding my metatarsal boots or steel toe boots, because I can't get them in my size. Really, we're trying to bring more awareness to the companies that are offering it and promote it to those here in the Pittsburgh market.

Kirk: We have a helmet study going on right now. There are lots of new things that are not just for women, but such advancements going on in general for PPE. Having a fashion show of all

the new options and availabilities, especially focusing on the fit for people that are differently sized and shaped, I think there's a lot of value. Again, let us know how we can help. That sounds awesome.

Danielle: Kirk, I think we're going to sign you up to be one of the models. How about that?

Kirk: Don't threaten me with a good time.

Danielle: Again, for everything that we do, yes, it's a lot woman-focused, but it's not to go against the men in this industry by any means. We're just trying to work together, work collectively, and help those that sometimes don't have that voice to be able to speak on their own behalf and be confident about it.

The PPE, yeah, we can bring in the new innovative helmet designs. It doesn't have to be just for women, but if we can rock one that has a ponytail slot, that's probably good too. As long as it keeps us safe, that's fine.

Kirk: That had not occurred to me until this moment, the ponytail slot and the hard hat. That makes a lot of sense. See, it's the things you absolutely don't think about in this traditionally, very male-centric. You don't think about it till you need to think about it.

Are there other things that I'm not thinking about that don't occur to us? Other things that need to be considered and attention paid to for women in construction?

Daniel: Joelle, I don't know. This would be a tag team. I know I went to a job site, one of the bigger projects around here, not too long ago. They did a women's day there. It was funny how one woman spoke about the PPE and it was the jumpsuit option that they had to wear. They were like, not to be gross or anything, but it takes us a little bit longer when we have to go to the bathroom that you don't think about. For them, from guys in certain situations like that.

It's not so much about, like I said, look at us. We want to stand on our own. There are things that you may not think about day-to-day. The biggest that we see around here, too, I mean everywhere is childcare, but that's not just a woman problem, it's a single parent issue a lot of times. With them not being open early enough or late enough, the cost is high.

A lot of it has to do with the times, especially when you need to be on a job site 6:00 AM, 7:00 AM, or something like that, and you're not done maybe till 6:00 PM or after. That's one of the topics we've talked about. There's a handful. A lot of it is just being able to have hard conversations and be taken seriously, I think, without being taken as angry.

Kirk: It doesn't need to be adversarial, it just needs to be inclusive.

Daniel: Right.

Joelle: Right. That is the childcare issue and all those things. Going back to the numbers of women in construction, women are somewhere around just under 11% in construction of the workforce, and it's even lower for women in the field. I think one of the big priorities of NAWIC is getting the message out about the needs of women in the field, because these kinds of things are what prevent women from going into the fields, not because they're not going to be talented tradeswomen.

That's part of the problem. We need incredibly talented tradeswomen who are passionate about what they're doing. But if they have to change their whole family structure, they might choose to have fewer kids or not have kids at all. That's a decision that all families deal with, whether it's a man in the trades or a woman in the trades. Making those decisions about your family life because you don't have the resources that you need to support your career, is a big problem for everyone.

Kirk: Even stepping back once from that, I was just talking to, a few months ago, the ironworkers who broke the mold of having maternity leave in labor, which was groundbreaking. I don't want to be wrong. I think they're still the only major that have the full maternity leave for people in the field. Is that correct?

Joelle: I think so. I think others were looking into it to see how it was being handled and what it looked like behind the scenes. But as far as I know, I think they're one of the only ones at the moment. I think other people were interested in trying to see how they could implement it.

Kirk: I certainly don't want to offend someone else who has absolutely pulled it off, and I just don't know about it. But I know that the ironworkers did, and it was a big breakthrough thing.

Danielle: It was huge. That was a big step for them along with other trades. It's very hard on your body and a very demanding industry, not just ironworking but in the trades, especially in the field. You're carrying a tiny human, and you're trying to take care of yourself, still work, and work hard.

You don't want to say, oh, I just want to sit over here on the sidelines, but some of that you have to really be careful, especially women that might have issues with their pregnancy, or they're high risk. They can't really afford to be off all that time. Yes, it was definitely a program that was well received and very ingenious for the times. Sad to say that it's taken this long, but it was great.

Going back to what Joelle said about being in the field, there are so few women in the field that I think a lot of times it's hard that if you have to go to someone, you don't know who to go to. Not that there aren't great guys that you can rely on, that you can talk to, you can talk about different situations, but sometimes it's not the same as going to another female because you don't want to

get emotional, or you don't want to come off as you can't handle it. Those are some of the things that we work through too and offer that continuing education or how to hold your own.

It's a struggle. You look at some of these in construction and all leadership is men, they are all men, which isn't bad. We're not saying it's bad. We're just saying that sometimes it's very hard to have certain conversations about certain things that you're going through and be understood or feel like you're being heard. That's really another avenue.

I remember being at Ironworkers and saying to some of our apprentices, what made you get into this? What made you want to be an ironworker, because it's not something we typically see? It's great and it's wonderful. We should have more, because they're some of the hardest working women I've seen, but a lot of times it's like, oh, I wanted to prove my brother wrong, or I wanted to hold my own, I grew up on a farm, or whatever.

They collectively created their own little network of women ironworkers here in this market so that they had someone to go to or lean on of how to handle it, because they'll tell you, we have good guys looking out for us, but sometimes they won't let us do the work because they don't want us to get hurt, but we need to show that we can do the work.

It's that dynamic that guys might see it as I am helping, I'm looking out for, I'm whatever. It's wonderful, but at the same time, you're like, but do I look bad to my foreman because I'm not doing it, because someone else is taking care of it? Those little dynamics that it's not necessarily done on purpose, but it's seen very differently from both sides that we're trying to help educate, if you will.

Kirk: I think you just answered my next question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Both of you have full-time jobs. Joelle, you're the assistant director of NECA, and Danielle, you're with the IWEA. Both of you are swinging big in your own lanes, and then taking on the NAWIC thing as well. Why is it important to do that?

Joelle: I get to see from the NECA side, how impactful it is when my member contractors give back when they contribute to the association and how much that helps the industry as a whole. I want to be able to do that with my expertise and with my strengths, be able to give back.

Camp NAWIC is a big reason why I got involved with NAWIC Pittsburgh in the first place because I'm very competitive, and I saw that Philadelphia had done a similar girls in construction camp. I know that if Philly can do it, then we can do it, too.

I didn't really see a lot of those opportunities when I was growing up here. I know a lot of young women around this area who could have incredible careers and family-sustaining careers doing these things. I'm really passionate about making sure that they can at least see examples of

The Construction User 2.0

women who are doing it and who are succeeding in doing it, because if they don't see the examples, then most of them are not going to explore the opportunity.

Kirk: You just said there's NAWIC Philadelphia and NAWIC Pittsburgh. Is there a NAWIC near you? The podcast goes out to everywhere. Are there NAWIC chapters everywhere?

Joelle: Yes, they are around the country. The website nationally is nawic.org. They have a chapter lookup there where you can figure out which chapter is closest to you and which jurisdiction you're in. You can join the chapter that is closest to you. Through that membership, you join NAWIC National also.

Kirk: Awesome. My not last question, but what events or things do we need to be on the lookout for? What are the ways to support? Obviously, you can join a local chapter, but what are the other events or sponsorships? What are the other things that people can do to support the NAWIC mission?

Joelle: Our biggest one throughout the year is WIC Week, which is Women in Construction Week, which is coming up. It's always the first week in March, so be on the lookout for engagement opportunities on social media if you get to share some NAWIC information on LinkedIn or other social media sites. We also do in-person events for WIC Week in most chapters.

I know Pittsburgh, we usually have a few, so definitely be on the lookout for all of those. There are sponsorship opportunities for all of those. Of course, volunteer opportunities at events like the fashion show and Camp NAWIC. Definitely follow us on LinkedIn, check our social media and our website for all those different opportunities.

Kirk: I love it. I think that it's a really important conversation for all of the reasons you guys have said. There's so much need to have inclusion and to bring these conversations up because sometimes they're awkward, different, or not always the most accessible things to do. There are a lot of cultural boundaries and historical boundaries, and I think it's an important thing to have these conversations be happening.

Is there anything else you guys want to throw in? Danielle, are there any closing thoughts on NAWIC, or Joelle?

Danielle: If there's someone listening out there that wants to be a part of it, definitely take the opportunity to attend an event or talk to a board member from your local chapter. Joelle's the one that talked me into it, to be honest, but I think we have similar ideas, thoughts, and competitiveness.

Our group, we have a wide variety of women in all different facets of the construction industry from attorneys, to labor, to PMs, and everything in between, which is really what we try to show

The Construction User 2.0

at our Camp NEWIC to all these young girls. They always say, if you can't see it, you can't be it. That's one of the things that we're really trying to push. You don't have to just be in the trades. There are other avenues to go.

Joelle and myself came from very different backgrounds, but we still wound up here. They have a lot to offer. We look at our chapter and we're trying to make these things happen. We always joke with each other and say it's a small group, but we're mighty. We always get things checked off the list.

A lot of us are working full-time, and a lot of us have kids at home. We're running with them. Don't be afraid to reach out to your local chapter to see how you can potentially become part of it. If you're not ready to be on the board per se, or just maybe volunteer, like Joelle had mentioned, to some of these events. It's well worth it and helps other women see that you can do this.

I'll be honest. When this job opportunity came up for me, I was very unsure at the time. It had never been someone that was female that sat in this role. When I sat down to think about it, I wanted to do it not only for my daughter, but for my son to show that we can do this. I can do this, but I've had a great support system.

NAWIC, I know, is someone that I can always go to and count on to have my back and always to bounce ideas off of. It's been wonderful. It's been a short tenure for me so far, but I love every minute of it.

Joelle: I'll second that, Danielle. I definitely want my daughter to be able to participate in Camp NAWIC one day. That's what we do this for.

Kirk: In closing, you guys have mentioned Camp NAWIC a few times. Who's it for? Where is it? If people were interested, you mentioned Philadelphia has one as well. Talk to me a little bit. If my daughter is listening, I have two that would be eligible. Talk to me about Camp NAWIC in closing.

Joelle: Yeah. I can't say I know of all of the Camp NAWICs that exist. I know that San Diego and the Minneapolis St. Paul area both have fantastic Camp NAWIC programs, if you're around there. Definitely check with your local area to see if they host something like that.

If you're in the Pittsburgh area and you have someone who might be interested, our website is nawicpittsburgh.com. All the information is right there on the home page, and all the application documents are open. We're accepting applications till April 8th.

Kirk: That's awesome.

The Construction User 2.0

Danielle: It'll be a week in June, last full week of June. It's for 8th grade to 12th grade, right Joelle?

Joelle: Yes, we're doing rising 8th graders to rising 12th graders over the summer. Last year we did a day with the electricians, a day with the ironworkers, and a day with the carpenters. We have gotten even more tradespartners who want to participate. We're really excited about all the opportunities we can give them, to see all the different career paths in construction.

Kirk: Are they splicing wires and hammering nails? What's the day look like?

Joelle: Yes, each day we had something active that they were able to do. I know for the electrician's day, they were looking at different meters and how a micro grid solar panel works on the lights that you have out in your driveway that have little solar panels on them.

For the carpenters day, they built a toolbox. They built a toolbox and they laser etched it. They got some virtual welding experience. Danielle can talk about the ironworkers' day.

Danielle: Yeah. I was really proud of our apprenticeship. They stepped up to the table and put the girls through the entire classroom, all the different facets of iron working that day. They tied rebar. We partnered with the operators here at local 66. They brought down their virtual crane. They did that as well.

They learned about structural steel and how to rig. Then they went to the weld shop and they welded some beautiful bling necklaces. They looked a little bit like Flame of Flame for those of you who remember Flame of Flame. They loved every minute of it. They climbed the column. They were immersed in the day, but they were immersed in every day that we had to offer, and then we took them to a job site to tour it as well.

Our plan again today is to show throughout the week how everybody can be involved in construction, how they work together, then take them to the job site to see it live and in person really. By the end of the week, those girls were very chatty and very excited to have done the program and willing to speak on its behalf, which was great, give testimonials, and also some wanted to come back and attend.

I think the lot found more interest in some of the different facets of construction than they ever would have known before. We're very excited for it this year. I think we're going to have a big, big application pool. We're excited to build from what we started last year.

Kirk: That sounds like a fantastic experience for all of them. I'm sure even the tradespeople that were putting them through it, we're having a good time with that. It just sounds like a good time had by all.

Danielle: For sure.

The Construction User 2.0

Kirk: Thank you both so much for joining us for this quick conversation about NAWIC. It sounds like it's doing some really cool things. If I can be a runway model for your fashion show, I'm super in.

Joelle: You're in. I marked you down. We'll send you the dates because you have to come to Pittsburgh.

Kirk: Done. You can be the one to tell Dan. Awesome. Sounds great. Thank you both so much for joining us, and I hope to work with you again soon.

Joelle: Thank you so much.

Danielle: Thanks so much.