

A community approach: Smoot exec Chrystal Stowe on why diversity and persistence matter

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Chrystal Stowe may have landed in the construction industry by chance, but she wouldn't change any element of her career trajectory.

Previously a reporter and public affairs director, Stowe joined Smoot Construction in Columbus, OH, in 1993 after she met an executive with the company at a social dinner. Stowe started out as a community relations consultant for Smoot, worked her way through job site roles and a relocation, and now holds the position of director of community affairs and business development for Smoot in Washington, DC.

Throughout her career in DC, Stowe has worked on the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, Nationals Park and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Her career has largely focused on drawing new workers into the industry and helping them find a career path. Improving diversity is a key goal for Smoot and Stowe. She recognizes the industry has changed since she entered the field — but it still has a long way to go.

"When I started in construction over 20 years ago, there weren't any women in the field, and there were very few black people working in the field," she said. "As women, we continue to have to assert ourselves in certain situations. But success has a way of clearing a lot of the noise out of any room."

Construction Dive spoke with Stowe about her experience on the job site, her community workforce development tactics and the once-in-a-lifetime project she helped bring to life.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited and condensed.

How did you get started in the construction industry?

STOWE: My first job in construction was on the redevelopment of a public housing community in Columbus, OH, to recruit residents of that public housing community to get trained in construction trades. I started in the field, in a trailer, learning the industry. I won't say I started at the bottom, but there were days it sure felt like that.

I was bringing a very non-construction and non-technical perspective, both to the company and to a project that really, at the end of the day, was about transforming the lives of these families.

It was less about the physical buildings and more about the lives we had the opportunity to impact in a positive way.

I had the opportunity to come to Washington, DC, when Smoot and Clark were working on the convention center. They were going to do a training program modeled after the program that I had developed for the public housing construction project. I came down and met with the team and gave them a tutorial on what we had done and how we had done it, and it developed into the first pre-apprenticeship program that the District of Columbia had ever done on a large-scale construction project.

A few years later, we had the opportunity to build Nationals ballpark and developed as part of that pursuit a very aggressive and comprehensive community benefits program that included not only the involvement of local businesses as subcontractors for that project but also working on a local hiring initiative. After we won the contract with Clark, they asked if I would stay and implement it. So I went back to Columbus, told my husband and kids the good news, and they all said, 'Does that mean we have to move to Washington?' And I said 'Yeah, that's what that means.'

How was your experience switching from the media world to the construction industry?

STOWE: The skill sets were very transferable because it was all about developing relationships with people. Client relationships are what I do now, in terms of chasing new business. It's all about them getting to know us and understanding and appreciating our capabilities as a builder. It is not unlike what you do as a reporter, where you're trying to get someone to trust and respect you. On the community relations side, it's not unlike when you're interviewing someone — the person that you're talking to just wants to be heard.

Can you explain further about your community initiatives to get trades involved with projects?

STOWE: I work with faith-based organizations, community organizations and nonprofits that are involved with preparing people for work. We have a number of tremendous resources in this market to help people on their journey to a career in construction. I don't really talk about jobs, because that is temporary. A career is what I am more focused on. To the extent that we can use our construction projects to start people on that career path, that's a great thing. I remember there was a woman, I first met her in the pre-apprenticeship program we did for the convention center, and by the time we were building the ballpark, she was a journey worker. And I'm so proud of her. It wasn't anything I did. Sometimes all you have to do is open the door, and people will walk through it and take advantage of the opportunities that are there for them.

Is Smoot experiencing a labor shortage in the DC market?

STOWE: Yes. In this market, in terms of coming back from the economic collapse, we haven't peaked. When I look down the road, particularly from a business development standpoint, I see this market being very robust for about 10 years. That also concerns me from a workforce standpoint because, generally speaking, the construction industry is aging. All I have to do is

look in the mirror and know that I'm not going to be doing this 10 years from now. Where's the workforce coming from to be able to fill these gaps? There's plenty of work on the horizon, but who's going to do it?

What we do right now in terms of attracting younger people to this industry will determine not only the success of my company but of every other major contractor in this country. What is it going to take to attract new people into our industry so that our companies can survive? Smoot is 70 years old. Are we as a company going to be around for 70 more years? I would like to think so, but to a large extent, that will depend on our ability to attract the kind of talent that it's going to take to sustain us.

Is your company reaching out to minorities and women in an attempt to draw underrepresented groups into the construction industry?

STOWE: Absolutely, and not just because we are a minority-owned company and want very much to maintain diversity within our ranks, but because I think there are individuals who would embrace [this industry]. Nothing in my professional development was steering me toward construction, but I believe that I am exactly where I am supposed to be. I consider the experiences that I've had in the construction industry to rival any experience that I ever had. The satisfaction that I get from not just from seeing our cities' landscapes transformed, but also being on the front lines of seeing how small businesses and individuals have been transformed by their opportunities to work on some of these large jobs. That's tremendously fulfilling for me personally and professionally.

One of [Smoot's] newest initiatives involves helping the homeless transition back into the workforce. We believe that the construction industry can be a part of that. We're very engaged with hiring veterans, those returning service men and women who have much to offer our industry, particularly at the management ranks. It's not just the entry-level construction positions. There are transferable skills in just about every industry that our company could benefit from.

Why do you think there's such a lack of diversity in the construction industry?

STOWE: When I first started in construction, nine times out of 10, I would find myself in a situation where I was the only female and the only person of color on a construction team. That has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. Now, I'm not the only one in the room. Companies have made a concerted effort to encourage people of color and women to enter this industry, and they've made the environment less hostile toward them. I remember being on construction sites where there were comments made about my race or my gender, and as many women do, we develop a deaf ear to that. It doesn't mean we don't hear it, it just means we don't react to it. What I've learned is that in many instances, that represents the attitude of a small group of individuals. I have outlasted many of those individuals. They're no longer around, but I'm still here.

I remember as a young project manager, I scheduled a meeting with some of the subs. They all arrived for the meeting, and one of these grizzled guys said, 'Well the project manager's late.

When's this meeting going to get started?' And I said, 'The meeting has already started, and I'm the project manager.' And there wasn't another word spoken about it. As women, we have to prove ourselves as being not just in charge, but knowing what it is what we're talking about and commanding the respect that our position deserves when we are in charge of a project. When you can successfully deliver a project for a client, when you can help that subcontractor make money, they love you for that. Those are the kinds of building blocks for success that can go a long way toward changing attitudes.

What was it like working on the National Museum of African American History and Culture?

STOWE: It's difficult for me to talk about that particular project without getting very emotional because it was one of the best building experiences I have ever had. Every person who worked on it stands up a little straighter and smiles a little brighter whenever they pass by the project or talk to someone about it.

I was on the Metro two weeks ago, and there was a teacher with a group of her students heading to the museum for their tour. This lady saw my Smoot folder and she said, 'You worked on the museum!' I was with one of my colleagues from Smoot who had been involved in preconstruction, and I was involved in the small business participation for the project. Here were two black women who worked on the museum, and this teacher called all of her students over — she wanted them to meet us, to learn about our involvement in the museum. Then she said to her students, 'This could be you. You could have the opportunity to work on a museum like the African American museum.' I don't know that I've been prouder to work for Smoot and to have the opportunity to work on the museum than I was in that moment.

When you understand the history of what it took for the Smithsonian to even get to the point of building the museum, and then for us to overcome all of the challenges associated with bringing that museum out of the ground, and then the race to the finish. It was phenomenal. The willingness of folks to really step up and work untold hours just to deliver that amazing building, not just for the District and the nation, but I think for the world.

The funny thing was when we won the job, I told my husband, 'This is going to be the best job ever, and I'm going to retire after I finish.' And he reminded me a few weeks ago that I made that promise, and I said, 'Well, I'm not quite ready. I want to see what else is out there.'

What advice would you give to women or people of color entering the industry?

STOWE: Come into this industry expecting there to be challenges but being fully confident knowing that you can overcome those challenges because you have the training, you have the skills, you have the ability to be here and to make an incredible impact on our industry.