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Linda Rabbitt built one of the largest woman-run commercial construction firms in the US. It could have come crashing down—even before the pandemic.

SURVIVAL OF THE STRONGEST

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Q&A

There was no doubt in Linda Rabbitt's mind that Rand Construction would survive the pandemic. It would be a fight, for sure, but the 72-year-old founder of one of the largest woman-led commercial construction firms in the US is no stranger to adversity. "I think I have a PhD in survival," Rabbitt says.

And that's hardly hyperbole. Her story has been marked by personal and professional battles from the very beginning. Left with little after escaping a difficult marriage in the late 1970s, the former schoolteacher with two young children took a job as a secretary at an accounting firm. Recognizing Rabbitt's managerial acuity, a peer asked her to partner in forming the first woman-run construction company in the Washington, DC, area. Several years later, Rabbitt's partner dissolved their partnership, forcing her to start from scratch again. The single mother went on to build Rand Construction Corp.—not without a few more lessons in hardship. She almost lost the business twice, the first time in 1995 when her next partner abruptly left to start his own real estate consulting firm. "My community gave me a very hard time," she says of taking over Rand. "I felt like I already had all the skills—I just needed to prove them and gain credibility."

Over the next two decades Rabbitt built up that credibility, rising to become a leader in the construction industry. Then, in 2014, tragedy struck and she nearly lost the



As a woman leader in an industry that's 90 percent male, how difficult was it for you to gain acceptance when you took over the business in 1995?

LR: People in the industry were saying, "The guy who knows construction is leaving—she's just the marketing chick. She'll be out of business in 90 days." ...I felt like I already had all the skills—I just

needed to prove them and gain credibility, which is why I started taking leadership positions with so many not-for-profits and industry associations. I worked seven

company again. With retirement on the horizon, Rabbitt and the board had identified a successor. But before he could take over, he died piloting his own airplane. That left Rabbitt (who had faced her own mortality years prior when she was diagnosed with breast cancer) with a decision: shut down the company, sell to an outsider, or sell internally. She chose the latter. "It was the right thing to do to keep the legacy alive," she says.

It turned out to be a good decision. Today, Rand—which specializes in commercial interior build-outs and commercial building improvements, and counts Adobe, Gensler, and several of the world's largest hospitality and technology firms as clients—spans five offices and counts nearly 300 employees, while generating roughly \$450 million in annual revenue. National media outlets, including most recently the *Washington Post*, consistently rank the company as one of the top places to work.

The construction industry as a whole is starting to build its way back from the pandemic. After losing more than 1 million jobs at the start, it has added back at least 750,000 positions through June. Construction spending is forecast to grow around 4 percent this year, to \$810 billion, propelled in part by the president's infrastructure initiative. Against that backdrop, *Briefings* spoke with Rabbitt, who stepped down as Rand's CEO in 2018 but remains active as the chair of its board of directors, about her views on leadership, navigating the pandemic, and what's ahead for the construction industry. (Edited for clarity and brevity.)

months, seven days a week, re-creating Rand and building up the confidence of the community. We have won craftsmanship awards every year since the second year we were in business.

Is there a parallel to draw between then and how you had to chart a new path forward when the lockdowns went into effect last year?

Photo courtesy of Rand Construction

Not so much then, but there are definitely parallels between how we coped with COVID and how we coped with the death of my successor in 2014. Our ability to communicate and stay together as a team and a family during that difficult time served as a model for how we communicated during COVID. In both instances, we had so many logistical and HR issues to get through. With the pandemic, for instance, we have licenses in 26 states, each with different health and safety mandates and protocols. We had

"For so many years, I was the only woman in the room."

industries; it's dependent on the leadership in those companies; it's dependent on the size of the company. A big multinational company can't ever go all in on work from home. At the same time, it used to be that maybe 10 percent or 20 percent of your workforce couldn't come into work from nine

daunting and a little bit lonely. But now there are so many more women decision makers in the room. That has been a huge difference. One of the positives to come out of the recent social unrest in the country is that corporations are taking more responsibility for diversity and inclusion in their supply chains. That will help give confidence to women and people of color to be more entrepreneurial. **How do you approach diversity, equity, and inclusion in your company?**

Building in a Pandemic

The construction industry, while now rebounding, faced a number of tough challenges during the pandemic.

Net jobs lost as of August 2021 240,000	Total change in construction spending in 2020 22%	Forecast construction-spending growth in 2021 3.8%	Added cost to new single-family homes due to higher lumber prices \$17,000	Projected growth in new office construction in 2021 despite remote work 8%
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people in harm's way, which brought the whole company closer together. There is something very heart-warming and magical about people thinking about their coworkers in a different way and, you know, covering for each other and helping each other. I think the real us showed up because we had no choice—it was in our mutual best interest and in our personal best interest.

What are the prospects for commercial real estate in a post-COVID world where many workers will be punching in from home?

I have read everything I can read on this subject, talked to as many people as I can talk to, and I can honestly tell you, it has yet to be determined. It is uncharted territory. We work for a lot of national corporations, law firms, and accounting firms, and everyone's trying to figure out what's next. Nobody has the magic answer.

What does your gut tell you?
I think it's dependent on the

to five. Now we're negotiating with 100 percent of people about their work life, their work styles, what they're comfortable with, and what they can actually do within the confines of their personal lives.

Speaking of work-life balance, Rand is consistently named as a best place to work overall and for women specifically, in part because of its family-friendly policies.

For so many years as a professional, I was a single mother. I had to constantly balance my ambition with the responsibilities of raising two daughters. Now I see my daughters having to do that, because they're both working moms. I learned how to have a work-life balance as a single parent and wanted to make sure that happened for the people I care so much about.

What can the construction industry do to attract more women into the field?

For so many years, I was the only woman in the room. That was

Because I'm the leader, there is already diversity of thought. Women often approach problems and strategy very differently. We start at the top with diversity of thought and from there we focus specifically on our employee workforce and within our subcontractors and supplier relationships.

What now?

This is really my time to give back to the people who have been so supportive of me. I still sit on the boards of several public and private companies. I also started a course at Harvard Business School to teach C-suite women the roles and responsibilities of being on corporate boards. My father used to say, "Leave things better than you found them," so I've lived by that motto for a very long time. You know, in the life of an entrepreneur the highs are high, the lows are low, and there's not much in the middle. But through all the ups and downs, I look back and I think, "Wow, we did it. We made a statement." //