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ANNUAL MEETING 2022 RECAP

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CALLINE CASTLE: AN INSPIRATION FOR
YOUNG WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION

FEATURE STORY



She Knows the Drill

Alissa Maxwell Weiss is a third generation - and first female - President of Hub Foundation Co., Inc.

BY JILL MAXWELL, HUB FOUNDATION CO.

The first time he saw Alissa Maxwell, says Mike Lamothe, she was mixing grout. “She had more mud on her than anyone else,” recalls Hub Foundation’s equipment manager. “I thought, the owner’s daughter is busting her hump like this?”

Today, Alissa Maxwell, now technically Alissa Weiss, is the President of the foundation construction company her grandfather founded, and her father subsequently ran for 40 years. She may be third generation, but she’s the first female to fill those steel-toed boots. From the conference table in Hub’s Chelmsford, Massachusetts, office, Alissa swipes her phone to send an email about a subcontract for a Rhode Island DOT bridge project. Then, looking up from her screen, she says, “It’s a male-centric, male-dominated trade.” A growing construction company, a family business, female leadership—Alissa knows the drill.



*It’s a male-centric,
male-dominated trade*

GROWING UP HUB

Francis Maxwell founded Hub Foundation as a pile driving outfit in 1966. According to family lore, Grandpa Francis weighed one other option—starting a doughnut shop. “Some years, I wish he had gone ahead with that, because donuts taste much better than bentonite,” jokes Jim Maxwell. Jim took over the business in 1981 and then shepherded it through a literally ground-breaking transition to large diameter drilled shafts. Under Jim’s leadership, Hub’s fleet of equipment expanded from one Soilmec drilling rig in 1990 to a full fleet of heavy equipment; its two pile driving crews ballooned to more than 100 employees. He further diversified into slurry walls and micropiles. “The business grew because I recognized early on that there were huge gaps in my knowledge base that I had to fill by hiring the right people and compensating them for their efforts. Part of the game is letting good people take charge of their areas of expertise and letting them feel responsible for the way things turn out, good or not so good,” Jim says. “We plow our profits back into the business so that everyone feels supported by up-to-date equipment. We also take advantage of training and information garnered

from ADSC and our equipment suppliers,” he adds. “It’s important that we see and understand techniques developed across the country and around the world.”

When it was time for Jim to step back from the business he had poured so much into, he turned to his daughter. From the time she was 14 years old, Alissa studied all aspects of the business. First, she helped her dad organize his estimates. Pretty soon she was asking questions and figuring out how to estimate a job herself. Then, from the ages of 18 to 23, she worked in the field whenever she could while home on breaks from her geology studies at Hamilton College. She was a Sandhog in the Tunnel Workers Union Local 88 for five years, and then became a pile driver with New England Carpenters Local 56 like her father and her two older brothers, Jeff and Greg. She worked on grout plants, organized concrete will-calls, changed teeth on augers, and assembled Victaulic fittings. “I learned how to cut and weld—poorly,” she says.

Shawn Skinner, who now helps to run Hub’s equipment yard, proudly notes that he’s the company’s longest-serving non-Maxwell employee: “I beat Alissa by two months.” He remembers working with Alissa on the Little Dig, a long stretch of Route 146 near Worcester, Massachusetts. “We would swamp the rig, change the buckets, set up concrete, put a tremie pipe together, and then we’d switch,” he says. “We were all learning at the same time.” Alissa and Shawn have now worked together for more than 25 years. “It’s because of the loyalty I noticed from Jim,” Skinner says. “If you do a good job, they’ll keep you going as best they can. I thought, I’d like to give them 20 years for giving me a chance to get into the union and provide for my family. I made that decision 23 or 24 years ago.” Skinner’s observation is as true today as it was back then. Hub is a family business in every way.

SIBLINGS WITHOUT RIVALRY

At some point the growing company’s needs outstripped even the abilities of its legendary longtime office manager Ronni Kiley, and Alissa began spending more time behind a desk, bidding out jobs, administering contracts for bids won, and managing insurance policies and the like. Over time she took on more oversight of the financials, ultimately working her way to the corner office. But there is a blue piece of equipment at Hub’s shop that everyone still refers to as “Alissa’s grout plant.”

Meanwhile, Jeff and Greg had been more focused on running projects in the field. They have drilled the foundations for everything from billboard monopoles and baseball field lights to entire subway lines, hospital wings, university buildings, and countless bridges. Hub has now completed close to 1,500 foundation projects. Jeff and Greg’s expertise—earned standing in mud on night shifts, living out of town for jobs, and rocking on barges in the harbor—is in the industry’s highest echelon. “Alissa



ALISSA AND HER GROUT PLANT

had more experience in the office with insurance, contract language, and estimating procedures,” Jim says. “I knew she would accept guidance from her brothers regarding crew size and job progress.”

Jim adds that Alissa’s work experience outside of Hub—she did a stint on a research vessel in Antarctica and then hopscotched the globe teaching study skills to high school kids—would serve her well in running a business. “In both of those jobs, she had to rely on her own wits and a sense of how to handle herself without any backup,” he says.

Fortunately, Alissa has backup in the form of her two vice presidents, Jeff and Greg. “Rather than crowning an heir to Jim, and keeping the pyramid steep and the responsibility

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heavy, we realized that there are plenty of decisions to be made and responsibilities to be shouldered, especially with the growth we've had in the past few years," Greg Maxwell says. "There's room for the three of us to go to work together and not feel like anyone is the boss—but also to not feel like the problems are yours alone."

So, the three siblings run the company together and are all raising their families in the same Boston suburb. Everyone they meet, both professionally and personally, expresses amazement that the brothers and their sister work with each other so smoothly and successfully. The key, according to Alissa, is that they are level-headed, honest people. "We don't let anything build up," she says. "We all discuss any issues as they arise. We are willing to help each other, and nobody's too good to do anything. It goes back to Jim calling himself chief cook and bottle washer. None of us are too good to do any job."

Jeff Maxwell offers another explanation. "We grew up in a huge extended family. Everybody had to get along to break bread together." Jeff also remembers something Jim told him a long time ago: "Your family in your business can either be the strongest part of your business or the weakest, and that decision is up to you."

They have made their decision, working together for their common goals of safety and success. "Our challenge is to integrate new personalities with different subsurface technologies, and to do it in a zero-incident environment,"

Jeff says. As president, Alissa says, she wants to maintain a focus on safety as the company grows. "I want to continue to hire quality employees, purchase the right equipment for the job, and make sure that our projects create reliable jobs—to give the families of our employees a sense of security and to know that they are coming home safe."

Like Shawn Skinner, Mike Haigh appreciates the culture the Maxwells created. The master mechanic recalls earlier Hub days, "bouncing around in the front seat of a beat-up pickup with Alissa and Jim." Haigh has maintained the company's fleet for 30 years. "Working for a family-owned company has been absolutely awesome," he says. "I think very highly of the Maxwells. We have had our ups and downs, but they're very supportive and knowledgeable people."

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

The Hub office now hosts a busy team of both men and women, including engineer Swetha Chennu and civil engineer Amy Cohen, P.E.; administrators Beth Geary, a certified public accountant, and Jill Maxwell, who does certified payroll; Maya Minkin, who manages special projects; and Paula Mabardy, the office manager without whom Hub would very quickly and completely unravel. When Cohen, who has a background in environmental consulting, first joined Hub, Alissa began showing her how to estimate drilled shaft jobs. "As someone from the



HUB'S JILL MAXWELL, ALISSA WEISS, AND MAYA MINKIN ARE SISTERS-IN-LAW AND COLLEAGUES

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outside coming in and not knowing how her role evolved, I would have thought she had started in the office,” Cohen says. “But she has put her time in in the trenches. She learned the field operations first and then transitioned to the business side. You can’t estimate without understanding what goes on in the field.”

But construction has been so male for so long. As Mike Lamothe recalls, “My first impression was, Alissa stood out as a woman in the workplace. It wasn’t as prevalent as it is now,” he says. “If she was struggling, and I offered to help, she would say, ‘This is my job.’” Sometimes, when Alissa is at an industry event, other attendees approach her husband Eric Weiss to shake hands. Eric is an entrepreneur on his second startup with no connection to Hub whatsoever.



HUB'S GROWTH HAS NECESSITATED THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW STORAGE AND MAINTENANCE FACILITY FOR EQUIPMENT. PICTURED LEFT TO RIGHT ARE MAYA MINKIN, SPECIAL PROJECTS MANAGER; ALISSA WEISS, PRESIDENT; AND AMY COHEN

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ENGINEER SWETHA CHENNU OF THE SMALL-DIAMETER DIVISION CONSULTS WITH ALISSA ON PLANS FOR A PROJECT

“People predictably go directly up to him and ignore me, which always gives us a laugh!” Alissa says. She is even more sensitive to the challenges that women face on job sites. “It’s hard to be a female, to be a parent, and especially to be a mother working in the field, where the hours are so unpredictable,” she says. “My greatest respect is for the women who can do it.” Alissa was

able to bring all three of her sons to the office when they were small so she could keep tabs on the business, but she and her team struggle with the inherent disparity between office and field. While Hub strives to offer flexibility, as a union shop it just isn’t possible to shuffle crew composition, and unfortunately, you can’t drill a hole from home.



AMY COHEN, AND ALISSA WEISS LOOK ON AS AHMAD EL-KHATIB AND JOHN MCKINNON CONDUCT A PILE LOAD TEST

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JOHN MCKINNON, AMY COHEN, ALISSA WEISS, SWETHA CHENNU, AND MAYA MINKIN AT A SCHEDULING MEETING IN HUB'S OFFICE

Creating opportunity is one arena where Hub is positioned to make an impact. The City of Boston has long held workforce participation requirements for women; other entities, including the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, have recently begun making the same demands. Hub pursues multiple channels to recruit and retain women in the workforce. One Hub employee volunteers with Building Pathways, a Boston-based pre-apprentice program that creates opportunities for women and people of color to enter the union trades; another attends job fairs for Massachusetts Girls in Trades. And Hub's welders mentor young women in local vocational and technical high schools, giving them hours of experience in the company's equipment yard.

Increasing the female workforce is a long-term process. The most immediate thing Alissa can do is lead by example. On a cold and sunny day this winter, Alissa drove away from Hub's office in a company truck to move a piece of steel. She had volunteered to help construct a new bridge that will provide handicapped access from a local elementary school to the adjacent conservation land. Like so many women before her—including her late grandmother Kathleen Kane Maxwell, once a physicist on the Manhattan Project who served as Hub's treasurer for decades—Alissa is blazing a trail for other women and girls to follow. They won't be able to miss her in her high-vis Hub jacket. "She came through the mud and the dirt and the concrete burns," says Mike Lamothe. Call it the concrete ceiling and consider it smashed. ▲

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Alissa is blazing a trail for other women and girls to follow. They won't be able to miss her in her high-vis Hub jacket. 'She came through the mud and the dirt and the concrete burns,' says Mike Lamothe. Call it the concrete ceiling and consider it smashed.