

# SUNSHINE

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## Carving a New Future

How **women** are  
getting ahead in the  
blue-collar world

Ann McNeill,  
construction-  
company president



chose police officer.

With BSO, she worked her way up from juvenile detective to detective captain in the investigative unit. She now supervises homicide and cold cases, violent felons and sex offenders, abusers of old people, children and animals. She also supervises detectives who handle cases ranging from bombings to economic crime.

"I did the thing you were supposed to do at FSU," Dickey says, "and I still planned to do the female thing of juvenile officer or social worker, even when I graduated." She pauses. "You know, it's funny how my Dad and brother and I all ended up in the helping professions."



ANN McNEILL STARTED out as an accountant, working for the Urban League of Greater Miami. When she moved to the budget office of the Metro-Dade Transit Office two years later, however, she says she saw the future of Dade County — and the prospects for construction work.

"We had to do forecasts, budgets and budget-variance analysis in terms of working with the planning of the future of transportation for Dade County," says McNeill, 42. "What that told me was that there was going to be a lot of money spent over the next 20 years — and that was 20 years ago."

Today, McNeill's construction company, MCO Construction & Services in Miami, works exclusively for public agencies and has flourished under government set-aside programs. But construction was hardly the career McNeill envisioned for herself when she graduated from Miami's Florida Memorial College with a degree in accounting.

She had hoped for a long career with Pratt & Whitney and had applied to the aircraft manufacturer twice before being hired. After she started working there, however, she regretted her decision.

"I had a supervisor who told me that blacks and women had no place at work, especially for him at this place, and that I should be home, barefoot and pregnant," McNeill recalls. "So I transferred into proposals and contracts."

That was before the McDuffie race riots in Miami. The 1980 riots lasted several days, and when they ended, Dr. Barbara Carey, a Dade County commissioner, spearheaded a county ordinance mandating that 30 percent of every public dollar spent go to minority contractors.

McNeill thought she knew why Pratt & Whitney hired her: because she was African-American. She figured that could help her succeed in her own business.

"Major contractors during the 1980s had to comply with federal regulations that said a certain percentage of employees must be black and must be women," McNeill says. "They got two points for me, because I was black and I was a woman. So I figured if they could get two points, I could get the other 98 for myself."

She began working for free for contractors, spending every weekend pounding nails and learning carpentry, painting, roofing, estimating and bidding. Every day after work she and her husband, Daniel McNeill, spent another four hours restoring property they had bought as an investment. Her last year at Pratt & Whitney she worked weekends for a local black contractor doing everything from bookkeeping to helping with the estimating, marketing and bidding for contracts from public agencies.

At the end of the year, she left Pratt & Whitney. Today, McNeill has a master's degree in finance from Barry University. Her company has to its credit major municipal projects, including West Palm Beach's \$20 million police administration building and parking garage, the largest project in the city's history. McNeill still marvels at how her plans diverged from reality.

"Most of us, as people of color, as African-Americans, because we come from working-class families, our parents instilled in us the importance of going to

Ann McNeill  
sits in the  
driver's  
seat as  
president  
of her own  
construction  
company in  
Miami.

