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## [Greater Vidalia® Workforce Development Strategy - "This Girl Can" 2022 Update](#) [1]

On 15 Nov, 2022



The panel participants included the following: Ana Popp, Project Manager with McCarthy Building Companies; Avery Tyndall, Project Engineer with Juneau Construction; Anna Thurmond, Preconstruction Engineer with Juneau Construction; Teja Velagapudi, Superintendent with Batson-Cook; Ashley Field, Licensed General Contractor with Steven Bodek; Kelley Lowe, Sales Manager with Repurpose Savannah; and Mechelle Beacham, President and Wwner of JG Beacham Electric.

On November 14, 2022, AGC Young Leadership Program Council Member Mahsa Poorak moderated a panel of women in construction for the "This Girl Can" program at Southeastern Technical College in Toombs County, Georgia. "This Girl Can" is an after-school program designed to introduce middle school girls to career paths that are not traditionally associated with their gender. This semester, the students have been introduced to welding, HVAC, automotive maintenance, and were taught how to energize a lightbulb.

With help from the YLP, the Independent Electrical Contractors of Atlanta (IEC), and the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), Mahsa assembled a panel of seven women to speak to seventh and eighth grade girls about their experiences working in construction. The panelists represented different areas of the construction practice, as well as a variety of experience levels. They told the students about the many opportunities for women in construction, navigating the workplace as one of the only women present, and how their career progression to their current jobs was not always linear. The panelists encouraged the students to follow their passions, and explained that almost any interest they have can translate into a successful career in construction. A brief bio

of each panelist and what they spoke about follows.

### **General Contractors**

Ana Popp, project manager from McCarthy Building Companies, spoke about her transition from studying math at the University of Georgia, to transferring to Georgia Tech to study civil engineering. She told the girls about the opportunities for travel her work has provided, and how she has been able to see different parts of the country through her job. Ana brought a safety vest designed for women and showed the girls how the size compares to those designed for men. She also brought a female-specific safety harness and explained the importance of having safety equipment that appropriately fit all members on a jobsite.

Avery Tyndall, project engineer, and Anna Thurmond, preconstruction engineer, from Juneau Construction spoke about the value of working at a women-owned company. They explained the importance of working internships while in school to help figure out what type of work interested them. Anna explained her job duties working in preconstruction and how she grew into that position from when she started in Juneau. Avery spoke about her experiences working in the field on a project for Emory University.

Teja Velagapudi, superintendent from Batson-Cook, gave great insight into being a woman leader on a mostly male jobsite. Her excitement for her work was palpable and impactful. Teja shared her path from studying architecture and design, to deciding she wanted to be more involved in building projects rather than just conceptualizing an idea. She encouraged the girls to work hard and not accept when anyone tells them they cannot do something.

### **Specialty Contractors**

Ashley Field, licensed general contractor with Steven Bodek Inc., told the girls about working on historic renovations of properties in Downtown Savannah. She emphasized that the girls could find great success in construction, even without a college degree. She also spoke about the variety of opportunities in construction, including her time working construction at the Universal Studios theme park in Florida. Ashley explained that she became a licensed general contractor after working in the industry for more than four years, and that it was possible to start a company after gaining work experience rather than a college degree. She also emphasized how rewarding it has been for her to grow into her role and have customers seek her out because she is a successful women-owned contractor.

Kelley Lowe, sales manager with Repurpose Savannah, spoke about her experience breaking down historic buildings and reusing the materials she finds. She excitedly told the girls about working with an all-women team and how they are regularly commended for their quality of work. She even brought a piece of wood she reclaimed from a project to show the girls! She explained the value of teamwork at her company and the value of learning quality craftsmanship.

Mechelle Beacham, president and owner of JG Beacham Electric, spoke about her path from being a dental assistant, to owner of an electrical contracting company. Mechelle told the girls about her experiences working in the field and how her small stature made her a better fit (literally) to do certain aspects of the job, such as fitting in tight spaces. She explained to the girls that any education they get will help them in the future by comparing the distribution of power from an electrical panel to the nerve system in the human body.

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