

[Laura Bush Has Lived the Changes in New York-Area Construction](#)

[Consigli's operations manager decamped from the U.K. 20-plus years ago and built a career as one of the few women in industry leadership](#)

COMMERCIAL OBSERVER

Tom Ascitelli

April 5, 2023

About five years ago, Laura Bush took her youngest daughter, age 6, to a New York City construction site that she was managing. Bush, then an executive with the construction giant Lendlease, wanted to check the foundation of the project.

As they arrived at the project's edge — they would go no farther given her child's age — something amazing happened: Three female lathers emerged from a hole in the ground carrying rebar.

"So I could tell my daughter all about being a female working in the industry and everything else, but for her to physically see three lathers on a job site doing their job was, like, phenomenal," Bush told Commercial Observer in mid-March.

It's been a theme throughout Bush's three-decade career: Women are a rarity in construction. Women in top leadership positions are even rarer. Bush is one of those women.

In September 2021, Consigli Construction Company tapped her to become its New York-area director of operations, a decision-making role that now has Bush, 46, in charge of 125 employees out of two offices — one in Ronkonkoma, Long Island, and the other off Times Square — and myriad projects as the construction industry in general emerges from a pandemic that seriously impeded its work.

Women accounted for 10.9 percent of the construction labor force in the U.S. in 2022, [according to federal statistics](#). That's far below the female share in other industries, including manufacturing (29.5 percent), agriculture (27.7 percent) and transportation and utilities (24.1 percent). Bush said she has made it part of her remit at Consigli — and before, during a more than 26-year run at the Australia-based Lendlease — to up such shares.

Her own entry into the field started back in her native northern England. (So, yes, the onomastic similarity to a recent U.S. first lady is entirely coincidental.) She grew up in Blackburn near Manchester, and went to a career fair when she was 16. Bush knew she wanted to work outdoors, and construction might fit the bill. At the fair, she ran into someone from a construction industry training board.

"I'm interested in a career in construction," she told him. "I've got all the information, and I don't know what to do next."

The man from the training board set up Bush with a prime gig: shadowing construction workers at a big renovation project at Ewood Park, a professional soccer stadium in Blackburn. She fell in love with the work. "Luckily, my parents didn't object and say 'You're only 16' or 'Women don't do this.' They were quite the opposite. They really supported me in this."

It was then off to the University of Manchester in 1995, and coursework in construction management. A corporate sponsorship took her to Germany in her third year of college, where she not only picked up

practical field experience — including on the construction of a series of gas stations — but also learned the German language itself.

Throughout her work in college, she also couldn't help but notice how unusual she was. "Certainly, there were some women I trained with through college and through my sponsorship through college," Bush said. "I worked every summer, and there were a lot of women who were doing the same program as me. But I think we were three or four compared to 90 men."

The National Maritime Museum, Marks & Spencer stores, a London office building — Bush busied herself on projects like these after joining Lendlease following graduation in 1999. But she wanted size and scope. She couldn't get that in the United Kingdom. A mentor — another woman in the field — helped her land what was supposed to be a one-year assignment in the New York area beginning in early 2001.

That one-year stint is in its 22nd year.

For the first 20 years, Bush worked in various management roles at Lendlease on projects as varied as the AOL Time Warner Center ([now the Deutsche Bank Center](#)) in Columbus Circle, the luxury condo 15 Central Park West, the similarly luxurious residential buildings 3 Sutton Place and One Manhattan Square, and the Upper West Side's Aire apartment tower. Her first job as a senior project manager was for the Hyatt Centric Times Square, a nearly 500-room hotel [that opened in April 2017](#). From there, Bush became a senior vice president at Lendlease with national responsibilities, and she worked through the early part of the pandemic at the firm.

Then in late 2021 came the move to Consigli, and her work has continued on projects such as a buildout of space for the federal Homeland Security Department on Manhattan's Varick Street; renovation work on Temple Israel on the Upper East Side; a timber-heavy charter school in Hempstead, Long Island; and a new laboratory wing for the Bronx High School of Science, which [drew fulsome praise](#) from then-Mayor Bill de Blasio at its July 2021 groundbreaking.

Jeff Perlik is the head of development at the Arden Group, which in April is topping out its 222-unit rental project at 4650 Broadway near The Cloisters in northern Manhattan. The firm selected Consigli to build the 20-story mix of luxury and affordable housing after interviewing other nonunion general contractors and running the numbers. Bush's reputation preceded her, Perlik said, which also helped Arden decide.

"She's great, she gets to the bottom of shit, she gets stuff done — she's accommodating, she's motivating," Perlik said.

Bush for her part said she sees vast potential for Consigli in projects as varied as museums and higher ed to health care and more government work. New York City's looming Local Law 97, [which will demand carbon emissions cuts for most buildings](#), is also driving business toward the company. "Some of our clients are looking to get ahead of Local Law 97 and the electrification side of things," Bush said. What about office-to-residential projects [amid flagging demand for the former](#) and [insatiable thirst for the latter](#)? "Not yet," Bush said of business from such conversions. "But I see that coming. There is certainly interest there."

This potential business comes despite the general economic mishegoss and the twin challenges the construction industry specifically confronts amid a tight labor market and oscillating material costs.

“A lot of it has been about that direct contact with our clients and the same with our contractors,” Bush said during the CO interview from her office off Times Square. “I think also during COVID one thing that Consigli did exceptionally well from a business development standpoint was pounding the pavement and staying engaged, and not taking our foot off the gas.”

Bush is kind of the same way. She’s an early riser, and participates in Orangetheory Fitness classes during those early mornings. There’s the odd triathlon, too. Sometimes meetings pile up three or four at a time, and the Westfield, N.J., married mother of two has to farm out attendance to members of her team. Bush said this both frees her to focus on what she deems most pressing and to mentor the next up-and-comers in the business. Delegating is still something she’s getting used to.

“As I transition from a managerial to a leadership position, it’s ‘What can I give to other people to create an opportunity for them?’ rather than me feeling like I have to do it all myself,” Bush said. “I’m very much a fan of asking someone to do a task but not telling them how to do it.”

From Westfield, it’s into Consigli’s offices or, more often than not, into the field to various sites. Bush’s work also takes her into the wider construction industry’s efforts at demographic diversity. This, she said, was also something she had to appraise and parse. “I have to admit that when I moved here more than 20 years ago,” Bush said, “I felt like I had to be into everything, and that’s not how you should approach industry engagement.”

Bush has settled on supporting a group she founded and once chaired: the Ambassador Council for the 45-year-old Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW). NEW is exactly what it sounds like: a free training group for women who want to enter construction, including in New York. It says it has placed more than 3,500 women in construction jobs since 2005, and its Ambassador Council — a collection of professionals in the field — have done much of the placing. The council has also raised millions of dollars for and through NEW’s annual Equity Leadership Awards luncheon, according to Kate Krug, the group’s executive vice president

“I will add that Laura was an early advocate and trailblazer for tradeswomen in NYC and for NEW,” Krug said in an email.

The day before she spoke with Commercial Observer, Bush attended a New York Building Congress breakfast where New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy spoke. Hundreds of people were there. It’s been more than two decades since she started going to such industry events, and the audience demographics have shifted.

“There’s a lot more women and a lot more diversity in the room,” Bush said. “So, when you’re talking about the trades and everyone else involved — they physically see the changes occurring right before their eyes. They have to get on board with it. We’re not going backwards.”