

HEADLINE: Paving the way for women

SUBHEAD: Michaela Kirk traded high fashion for a hard hat to put her engineering degree to work in health care construction

Lipscomb Alumna Michaela Kirk is paving the way for women in construction one project at a time.

Kirk, ~~is the a~~ Business ~~d~~ Development ~~e~~ Engineer at Turner Construction, the number one health care construction manager in Nashville, ~~Is not only finding success in a male-dominated field, but she is also paving the way for women to enter engineering and construction with Girls Build It, a two-day camp to introduce girls to the industry.~~

Although she fell in love with the profession during her junior year at Lipscomb, construction was never on Kirk's radar ~~before college~~. For as long as she can remember, Kirk had a dream of moving to New York and ~~becoming~~ a fashion designer.

"My mom was a model in the '70s and that really sparked my love for the fashion industry," said Kirk. "During my senior year, my mom told me she didn't want me to follow in her footsteps because the fashion industry is a cut throat one. I thought to myself, 'I am 18, about to decide on a college, and you're telling me that I shouldn't do the only thing I've ever wanted to do?' ~~But it was okay and I knew something else would come along.~~"

Kirk decided that if she couldn't design clothing, she would design buildings. Her plan was to major in engineering at Lipscomb and then ~~she would~~ pursue a graduate degree in architecture.

It didn't take long for Kirk to find her niche as an innovator and leader in the engineering department. In 2015, ~~she~~ Kirk served as the project manager on Lipscomb's first concrete canoe team.

~~"We weren't participating in concrete canoe yet, so the summer before my senior year I told my advisor I wanted to start concrete canoe," said Kirk. "As the project manager, I assisted my teammates with the research. Our team went to several competitions just to learn best practices from teams that were already competing," said Kirk.~~

~~She~~ Kirk worked with four ~~students~~ other guys from her civil engineering class on the project, and ~~today~~ now students in the engineering department ~~still~~ compete every year in an attempt to create an 18-foot long canoe that will hold up to four people (650 pounds), while weighing about 700 pounds itself.

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~~It wasn't until her junior year that~~ Kirk discovered her passion for construction **in her junior year**, after hearing professionals **at a symposium** discuss future construction plans for the **Greater Nashville** area.

~~“I received an invitation to a symposium from a student in Vanderbilt's construction management graduate program,” said Kirk. “It was a construction symposium focusing on health care. I went and I fell in love with it. There were architects, engineers and civic designers, all talking about what is on the forefront of design in Nashville,”~~ **she said.**

Once she graduated from Lipscomb, Kirk **veered from the architecture path and instead** went straight into Vanderbilt's construction management program. Because most of her classes were at night, Kirk was able to work full time in an internship **at Turner.**

Kirk's internship ~~at Turner Construction~~ turned into a career when she was hired on after graduation as an assistant engineer. She now serves as Turner's **Business Development Engineer.**

“My position is unique in that I get to work with all of Turner's offices,” said Kirk. “We have offices in Nashville, Memphis and Huntsville. Any project that we pursue at Turner, I get to touch, ~~which is an interesting role to have.~~”

Kirk is using her role at Turner ~~Construction~~ to serve as a role model for young women interested in engineering and construction careers. Along with other female professionals at Turner ~~Construction~~, she has **established** ~~taught~~ a free two-day camp called **Girls Build It** ~~for the past two years.~~

“The idea for **Girls Build It** came from our HR manager at Turner,” said Kirk. “A company she previously worked for in California had a similar camp and she suggested we lead one here in Nashville. Since our paths to construction were all interesting, she thought we could be examples to these girls that construction is a viable option for them, too.”

The team began planning in August of 2017 and the camp officially started in June of 2018. Campers participate in hands-on sessions led by the women from Turner ~~Construction Company~~. From visiting landmark construction projects to building concrete lamps, campers get a view of trades, construction and engineering fields.

“This camp is a great way to show high school girls that they can use power tools and wire a concrete lamp, and they can have fun doing it, too,” said Kirk. “When I was in high school, I had

no idea construction was even a possibility for me, so being able to show them that it is an option and that they are capable is exciting.”

Even though Kirk was the only female in several of her engineering classes, she never let it bother her or stop her from holding leadership roles. Kirk has seven siblings and five of them are brothers, so she never felt as though her gender limited her career options, she said.

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~~Kirk has seven siblings and five of them are brothers, so she never felt as though her gender limited her career options, she said.~~ Even though working in a male-dominated field felt natural to her, she knows that not all females see construction or engineering as practical options.

“Grandparents give their granddaughters dolls while their grandsons get Legos. Girls get kitchen sets for Christmas and boys get toolkits,” said Kirk. “I think actions like these stay ingrained in our minds and then it feels like our careers and hobbies have been decided for us.

Kirk also inspired local school children to enter the engineering field at a Lipscomb event in February for National Engineering Week, where she spoke on a panel with Sharon Gentry, a Nashville African American leader with an engineering degree, and the author of *Hidden Figures*, Margot Lee Shetterly, who told the story of NASA's African American human “computers” in the 1950s and '60s.



“My advice to other girls is that the worst people can tell you is no, so it doesn't hurt to try out anything and everything that interests you,” said Kirk. Don't limit yourself to one area and don't let others tell you what career path you should take.”