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Hunts Points 'trailblazing entrepreneur' takes on big projects

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Center Sheet Metal is a get-your-hands-dirty kind of place whose employees work with steel and aluminum to fabricate custom-built heating ducts and other equipment.

The factory occupies a typical Hunts Point industrial building. The one-story utilitarian structure on East Bay Avenue two blocks from Food Center Drive is clad in brown brick punctuated by loading bays hidden behind roll-down grates.



Maureen O'Connor at her desk

Inside, fork-lifts maneuver around heavy machinery and welding supplies. It was surprisingly quiet in the factory. The few medium-built men working on that Thursday morning moved around the structures carefully and were lifting large steel blocks. Slight sparks came up from welding torches but there was barely any noise, all the employees were doing their job carefully and no one seemed rushed.

And then there's the boss's office.

The company's CEO wears a fitted black blazer and strappy sandals. Her toenails are painted bright red.

Plaques and framed awards hanging on the walls of her office salute Maureen O'Connor as a woman entrepreneur in a man's domain.

She is the recipient of the 2008 Hunts Point Trailblazing Entrepreneur award and was honored this September with the Woman Contractor Award from the Regional Alliance of Small Contractors.

Two days after winning her most recent award, O'Connor turned 50. With a laugh, she said the honor from the alliance was a good way to start a new year of her life.

Josephine Infante, founder and executive director of the Hunts Point Economic Development Corporation, a long-time friend of O'Connor, says she's special not only because she's a woman who is a business-owner, but because she is "generous to fault."

She cites O'Connor's efforts on behalf of her employees when the recession hit the building trades. Central Sheet Metal was not immune to the economic downturn, but O'Connor worked to assure its workers that none of them would be laid off, Infante said.

Although the slump in construction led the company to cut back workers' hours, unemployment insurance made up for the lost time, explained Maria Cambria, the company's business manager, who started at Central as a receptionist in 1995 and worked her way up.

"I feel Maureen O'Connor went above and beyond to handle this very trying time. By her taking control over the situation, I believe it gave relief and confidence to her employees, assuring them we would get through this," Cambria said.

Asked to describe herself, O'Connor starts with her father. "People looked at me and said, 'Hey, you must be Jimmy's daughter, except you've got flaming red hair.'"

The kinship extends to her work. Jim O'Connor founded Central with his partner Joe Gany. Maureen O'Connor went to work in the new company in 1979, two years after it opened its doors. In 1998 she and Victor Gany bought their parents out, continuing the partnership into the next generation.

Mindful of local concerns about polluting industries that contribute to the area's asthma epidemic, O'Connor says she is proud of the measures her company takes to safeguard the environment. "We do nothing with chemicals, no carbon emissions," she says. "We make ventilating systems and quality air for office buildings and hospitals. The only possible harm may be driving a truck to and from the Bronx."

Center Sheet Metal recently finished one of its biggest jobs, supplying ventilation equipment to the new Yankee Stadium. The company added 60 Bronx residents to its payroll to complete the work. Currently the factory is busy with what Gany calls "the largest sheet metal project we've done"—the ventilating equipment for the water filtration plant the city is building in Van Cortlandt Park. "You can't understand the scale of it, but it's huge," said Gany.

Over the years Central Sheet Metal has moved from Bruckner Boulevard to Hunts Point Avenue to its current location, but it has always been part of Hunts Point.

"Ultimately the heart of the Bronx stays in the Bronx," O'Connor said. "Hunts Point is like my neighborhood," she continued. "Hunts point is a second home."

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