



MICHELLE MONGEON ALLEN WITH HER HUSBAND, BRIAN ALLEN, AND THEIR THREE KIDS, (FROM LEFT) SAM, JOSIE, AND NORA. MALORIE JANE PHOTOGRAPHY

# THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG WOMEN LEADERS IN REGIONAL BUSINESS

BY MICHELLE MONGEON ALLEN, CEO, JLG ARCHITECTS

**E**ngaging with colleagues and clients from across the country, I've grown accustomed to quizzical expressions when I share that I grew up in Towner, North Dakota. "It's not the middle of nowhere," I assure them, "...it's actually 19 miles west of that."

Though clearly tongue-in-cheek, I don't joke about how great it was to grow up in the rural upper Midwest. But with a population of about 500, exactly zero percent of my hometown's citizens were architects, so it's reasonable to wonder how I found my way to this profession, much less executive leadership.

In a pre-internet existence, my world view extended approximately one tank of gas in a 1976 Mercury Marquis station wagon, which got me as far as Fargo. There, I somehow stumbled into a History of Architecture class at North Dakota State University that introduced me to the vocation that would change the course of my life.

I got lucky. But also made me think, how many other 10-year-old girls in the heart of America also waited in anxious anticipation of the Sunday paper to check out the published "floor plan of the week," without recognizing that maybe this wasn't exactly normal behavior for a fifth grader?

This experience has shaped me as the leader of a sustainably growing regional design firm, because our growth is dependent upon making sure that everyone born with this DNA sees this amazing, fulfilling, and important vocation as an acces-



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sible and viable career – and that it remains accessible and viable throughout their careers.

And that's where things seem to break down, particularly for women. Nationally, college graduating classes in architecture have held steady at a relatively even mix between male and female for decades<sup>1</sup>, yet that ratio drops to 17% for women when it comes to licensed architects<sup>2</sup>, and just one in five executives in the World's top 100 architecture firms are female<sup>3</sup> – though this statistic represents an impressive doubling in the past five years.

Why does this matter? It matters because we believe that to be a thriving, sustainably growing regional business, we must have access to the largest possible pool of talent. If we are failing to advance over a third of all architecture graduates, then we are limiting our potential as a firm.

While course correction can be complex, increasing the number of female role models directly addresses one of the primary reasons women give for deciding to leave the profession.

Without examples of other women who have been able to successfully navigate career advancement, many assume it's just not possible.

Our assessment at JLG has always been that diversity brings a rich perspective that is simply good business. It makes us better collaborators and problem-solvers for our clients and communities, and it ensures some measure of representation to the ever-broadening group of stakeholders our design solutions aim to serve. Expanding that diversity across organizational leadership communicates the availability of opportunity; women in leadership show, through our lived example, that we can carry many responsibilities and still revel in a joyful life.

While the fact of my gender played no role, positive or negative, in my career path development (and I gratefully acknowledge the gen-



erations of women before me who did the hard work that made this accessibility a foregone conclusion), I did need to challenge some pervasive narratives. For example, that it's ok to love my family and my work; that most things worth loving require seasons of sacrifice; that the oft-cited holy grail of "work-life balance" does not equate to an even parsing out of minutes, but rather to the satisfaction found in enjoying an abundant life; and that leadership is a viable option, not an all-or-nothing proposition.

I have long been among the contingent of women in leadership that eschews gender association when it comes to our success; "I am an architect, not a female architect." But it has become clearer to me just how important it is that strong women leaders own our drive and achievement because in championing our accomplishments, we make success more accessible to the next generation of fifth-grade girls who don't yet know they were born to be an architect.

*Michelle Mongeon Allen is a mom to three teenagers, part-time golf widow, homemaker, musician, and CEO of JLG Architects – a 100% employee-owned, almost 200-person multi-disciplinary design firm with offices in North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota. JLG delivers sustainable, accessible, and award-winning design solutions across the region and country.*

1 2019 Annual Report on Architecture Education (naab.org)

2 Around year 2222, will Equalize the Women Leadership in Architecture! -200 more years to go! (linkedin.com)

3 Women make up just one in five top positions at biggest architecture firms (dezeen.com)

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