

Yerba Buena Engineering & Construction Shows Strength Through Diversity

By Carol Eaton

Diversity and inclusion have been core values at Yerba Buena Engineering & Construction ever since President and owner Miguel Galarza opened his full service heavy civil engineering and construction firm in San Francisco's Bayview/Hunter's Point neighborhood in 2002.

Fostering that diversity is a point of pride for Galarza – borne out by the fact that over 90 percent of the company's staff of about 45 are people of color. And it is a natural outgrowth of his own background. Galarza grew up in the city's Mission District and attended Balboa High where, he notes, "If you weren't flexible and able to deal with different personalities and different cultures, you weren't going to survive."

An AGC of California member

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– Miguel Galarza



The Telegraph Hill Rock Bolts Installation project.

since the early days of his business, Galarza is an outspoken advocate for small business contracting in the public sector. He has received numerous commendations and awards from agencies and groups including the U.S. Department of Transportation, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, the California Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Small Business Administration, among others.

Earlier this year, AGC of America named Yerba Buena Engineering & Construction winner of its first ever Diverse Business of the Year award, bestowed during AGC's 2018 national convention in New Orleans.

In announcing Yerba Buena's top award along with four other diversity and inclusion excellence awards, AGC of America 2018 president Art Daniel

noted they "honor member firms and chapters that have established exceptional programs dedicated to expanding the diversity, and with it the strength, of the construction industry. It is a key part of a much broader effort to foster an even more diverse and inclusive construction industry."

Encouraging Diversity

In countless ways through the years – as community advocate, industry leader and small business owner – Galarza has made it his mission to encourage diversity and champion the underdog. The

result? He has built a steady, successful business in the heart of one of San Francisco's most challenging and ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

Galarza cut his teeth in the construction industry in San Francisco, digging ditches as a teenager and then moving into the trades after high school to work as a union carpenter for companies involved in



Miguel Galarza

federal contracting work. A decade or so later, he decided to head back to school to obtain his degree in construction management. Sixteen years ago, Galarza hung out his own shingle working as a HUBZone and Small Disadvantaged (SDB) firm specializing in heavy civil, marine construction, infrastructure, building construction, emergency response and environmental restoration work.

Over the years Yerba Buena Engineering & Construction has built a wide array of public projects in the Bay area and beyond. Projects span the gamut, and have included the Hunters Point Shipyard seawall construction project (2018) for the U.S. Navy, Gun Mole Pier building demolition at Hunters Point Shipyard, an emergency tiger exhibit project at the San Francisco Zoo, the Redwood Creek Bridge placement in Muir Beach, and the Telegraph Hill Rock Bolts Installation project in San Francisco, to name just a few.

Nontraditional Track

Through it all, Miguel Galarza has never forgotten his roots.

“We’ve had good years and bad, and all along I’ve kept in mind where I came from, my background,” he notes. “Not having come from a traditional track, in the world of construction and business ownership, I’ve looked to find talent where others may not be looking.”

Some of his best employees came straight from the non-traditional hiring playbook. Take Priscilla, the first employee that he brought on board after opening the company. “She was a woman of color who was 60-plus years old, recently divorced, hadn’t had a job in years,” he said. “She stayed with me 10 years and was the best guardian of the gate. She answered the phone professionally, she appreciated her job, and you couldn’t have anybody more loyal working for you.”

And then there was the young man from the local (Bayview/Hunter’s Point) neighborhood, who came in to talk to Galarza about his aspirations to



Gun Mole Pier Bldg Demolition, Hunters Point Shipyard

do more. “He had been doing flagging work for a competitor – and he hated flagging,” Galarza says. “I could see he was much more talented than that. We put him in the operating engineers’ union, and he also became a mechanic. He stayed with me for two years, then went to Kiewit, and now he is a manager for Caltrans.”

Galarza shares another story of “one of the best hires I ever made” — a 60-plus, out-of-work engineer who had lost his job when an established general contractor went out of business.

Where others had overlooked him, Galarza saw a diamond in the rough.

“He hadn’t had a job in three years and didn’t have a degree or computer skills. But he had skills none of my young engineers had – organizational skills, letter writing, RFI writing skills,” Galarza says. “To this day, we use a lot of the templates that he developed for the company. He just needed a break, and somebody to believe he had the experience without that degree to be able to help a team.”

Entrepreneurial Spirit

It is that willingness to look outside the box, develop from within and invest in people that Galarza feels sets his firm apart. More than pedigree, he looks for an entrepreneurial spirit – and the hunger to succeed.

“We are looking for that fire-in-the-belly entrepreneur type spirit. I’m a firm believer those are the ones who will treat your business like it’s their business,” he says. “As business owners, we often can get stuck on what creden-

tials do you bring, what degree do you have. Sometimes, you lose out on somebody who is hungrier. The talent might be right there in front of you, but you’re not looking.”

As a regular guest lecturer to engineering and construction management students at San Francisco State University, Galarza stresses the importance of “soft skills” – the ability to speak to a client and develop business, write a cogent letter, or articulate a position without being overly aggressive.

“We need the guy who can look at a budget, understand what’s in it, convey why it’s not in the scope of the work and why the client should be compelled to pay us,” he says.

Mentoring Others

Mentoring has played a big role in Galarza’s business success. He has been a mentor with the Stanford Latino Entrepreneurship Initiative, and formerly participated as a mentor in the AGC-Caltrans Mentor-Protegee program.

“I’ve tried to always make myself available to the young men and women that are starting their own companies, to make sure they know I may be your competitor, but I’m not here to put you out of business – I want to see you grow,” he comments.

He considers it a personal source of pride when his own employees move on to seek and achieve success on a larger scale elsewhere.

“I have had the honor of having at least three or four women leave my firm with the knowledge and experience to really take off and become senior managers at other organizations,” he says. One ended up running the bond program for a school district in Contra Costa county and is responsible for several hundred million in construction program.

“We’re all busy as business owners,” Galarza concludes. “But it’s really just about taking the time to pay attention to who our employees are, what their goals are, what their aspirations are and making sure that we try and position them as best we can to succeed.” ■