Taking Aim at The Top

Albuquerque’s Carolyn Mason Isn’t Awed By Complexity
As She Advances in Construction Management

She’s had a ringside seat in a period of convulsive change—and now she’s taking dead aim for the biggest job of all.

Furthermore, Carolyn May Mason isn’t the least bit daunted by her sex, her industry, or her eventual ability to handle the wide-ranging interests of the business her father started, the Bill C. Carroll Company, Albuquerque, NM.

Back in 1971 when she joined her father’s company as a secretary, Carolyn’s primary educational goal was to learn about lathing and plastering under a relatively uncomplex corporate structure. But these days the Carroll umbrella includes the Southwest Panel Industries, a Dryvit distributorship; Prefab Services, which provides architectural and shop drawings; Carroll Building Materials, a building supply firm; Wholesale Roofing Company, a roofing material wholesaler, and the Red Barin Lumber Company, in Durango, CO.

It’s a rather imposing profile, and one that Carolyn still believes is manageable. Married to G. Stanton Mason, an architect and president of Prefab Services, she sits at a desk speaking-distance away in the same office with her father and there watches and learns the process of running a specialty contracting business.

As secretary-treasurer of the company, she is hardly new to construction. Even as a teen-ager, she worked for Carroll. After graduating from Valley High School in 1966, she attended the University of New Mexico and then worked in various secretary-clerical jobs. When she returned to Albuquerque, she went directly into general management training for Carroll.

As she progressed through bookkeeping and accounting into estimating take-offs and job site visits, Carolyn also took an active role in industry affairs. She served as the chief volunteer executive for the Young Executive Council (now called the ACADEMY Council) and was recently elected to the AWCI Board of Directors. She also serves on AWCI’s Technical Subcommittee on exterior insulation systems as well as the education and the bylaws committees.

Lately, a great deal of her time has been spent with the local AGC where she serves as chairman of the AGC Crime Prevention Committee. She is also active with the American Subcontractors Association’s Albuquerque chapter.

The mother of two sons, Scott, 13 and Charlie, 10, Carolyn and her husband are remodeling a registered historic house they purchased in Albuquerque, using his architectural skills and the residential contracting knowledge she earlier picked up doing a work stint with a housing contractor in Los Angeles while her husband was finishing up his master degree in architecture.

DIMENSIONS: Carolyn, you seem to come down rather hard on crime prevention in construction. Is this a result of your work with the AGC group, or simply a personal commitment?

MASON: Actually, it’s a little bit of both. Our headquarters site was burglarized several months ago—and the extraordinary success of the thief pinpointed the shortcomings in our own prevention program.

DIMENSIONS: I take it that in the case of the Carroll company’s break-in you did have some sort of burglary protection in place?

MASON: Yes, but I’m afraid it was too much like protection systems that most contractors have. That is, it was a minimal system, really an add-on type of thing without being fully thought through as to what was required and what was provided.

DIMENSIONS: —too much like what most contractors have? Does that phrase indicate the burglary threat is soft pedaled?

MASON: The threat of burglary—in far too many cases—isn’t exactly hard pedaled. From the work I’ve done with the AGC group, the police and other authorities, it’s evident that many contractors don’t have a clear idea of the losses they’re sustaining on job sites . . . and how poorly protected their property is.

DIMENSIONS: What lessons did your own burglary experience bring to you? Is there something that other contractors can learn from?

MASON: There’s always something you can learn from such an in-Continued on page 10
“...I’m a woman and there’s a certain amount of ill-at-ease in dealing about money problems with me—and I encourage this discomfort. They expect female aggressiveness and they’re well prepared to handle it. So I don’t give them the opportunity.”

cident. The basic principle is: don’t be haphazard in your security planning. The individual who burglarized us was apprehended and, with good police work, we managed to retrieve most of everything.

But we still reviewed carefully what our security system had consisted of—and what it should consist of for the future. There is quite a difference.

**DIMENSIONS:** —for example?

**MASON:** Well, the thief originally gained entry to our headquarters complex by going over the roof, dropping down into a little open atrium and then jimmying open a glass door. Once inside he found a display board of ours, on which all of our keys—nicely tagged and identified—were hung. The alarm we had was wired for inside sound only . . . that is, it wasn’t connected to an outside police alert or anything.

Today, the glass doors at the atrium are secured in metal channels and can be opened only from the inside. We no longer have a single panel with all the keys identified for the convenience of a would-be thief. Our alarm systems now trigger off an inside telephone call which, if it goes unanswered, within minutes will alert the police. And this system has a back-up system.

**DIMENSIONS:** Carolyn, where do most contractors come up short when it comes to job site loss or security of their buildings and storage areas?

**MASON:** I believe—and I’m supported in this belief by the work that our AGC protection committee has done—that contractors simply don’t take the problem seriously enough. When it comes to job site losses, they write a certain amount of theft off as a simple job cost. If they added these losses up they’d often be surprised. In other areas, their security planning doesn’t represent a response to a real and present danger. They should realize that they’re a prime target for stealing and set up their security with that danger in mind.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about some of the other security steps . . . color coding, engraving . . . that sort of thing?

**MASON:** That’s a necessity. In the coding area, though, it helps to tie in your efforts with other construction groups. In Albuquerque, we all are coordinating our coding, numbering, and other identifying techniques with the police and the FBI computer network.

This means that if an expensive piece of equipment is stolen, it can often be traced across state lines. Seldom will a thief try to move such items in the same area.

**DIMENSIONS:** If you had to list the steps . . . 1, 2 and 3 . . . in an effective security system, what would they be?

**MASON:** First, a contractor needs an up-to-date listing of the complete inventory. You must know what you
have or things will simply walk away. Second, mark your inventory, either
with a special color code or a numbering system . . . an engraver for in-
stance. It would help to take photographs of everything . . . and I mean
everything.

Third, make it difficult to de-face
your codes or numbers. A welder can
lay a number bead on a piece of
equipment and this will change the
molecular structure of the metal so
that any tampering can be detected. Sometimes if a thief has a large re-
painting job to do, he’ll ignore a piece
of equipment.

Fourth, watch out when it comes to
keys. Making identification conve-
nient for company personnel is per-
forming the same courtesy for un-
wanted people. You’d have to be an
inside person to have a knowledge of
our company’s keys.

DIMENSIONS: That’s sound ad-
vice, but it’s been said that no secur-
ity system will keep out a professional
thief. Is that true?

MASON: If someone is determined
to rob you, he or she can make the
effort. But you don’t need to make it
easy for them. They’ll miss things that
way. Our alarm system has a back-up
system just so it wouldn’t be wise for
a thief to remain on these premises
very long.

A professional thief knows that
here he won’t have things laying
around for his convenience and he
also knows he doesn’t have much
time. For the most part, he’d prob-
ably be better off robbing someone
easier. And we will prosecute: as every
contractor should.

DIMENSIONS: Carolyn, your
desk is right here next to your father’s
so you have a ringside view to an ex-
perienced, capable contractor running
a highly diversified business. Don’t
you feel slightly intimidated about it
all?

MASON: Not really because I’m

emphasis on feminism. Does being a
woman here help or hinder?

MASON: It helps. Period. There’s
this brotherly, old pal relationship be-
tween the men that I’m not part of—
nor can I ever be. But I have certain
advantages in being a woman and,
frankly, I trade on that.

My job here involves accounts re-
cievables—and I say I can get through
to the individual I want often better
than anyone else. Secretaries are usually courteous to me—and so are the contractors that I must deal with. They treat me nicely because I won’t get angry and argue with them—and also because they know if I fail they’ll have to deal with Bill Carroll which can often be defined as a confrontation that’s best to be avoided.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about your accounts receivables? What’s your approach in an area where there simply are no hard and fast answers?

**MASON:** It’s tricky these days, no doubt about that. But I’m a woman and there’s a certain amount of ill-at-ease in dealing with me on a money problem—and I encourage this discomfort. They expect female aggressiveness and they’re well prepared to handle it. So I don’t give them the opportunity.

Remember, too, that it’s a secretary who put me through and she knows who her boss is talking to. A gentleman has to throw away an awful lot of self-esteem if he’s going to be rude to a woman who isn’t inviting that kind of response.

With the greatest back-up act in the business, I often have pleasant conversations. When I call on a bad payment problem, Bill Carroll is never too far behind.

**DIMENSIONS:** But he won’t be there forever?

**MASON:** I said I don’t get nasty with men. That doesn’t mean by any stretch of the imagination that I don’t know how, or lack the fortitude, to get nasty. I’ll do what the situation requires at the time it requires it.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about finding jobs? I take it you do a certain amount of birddogging?

**MASON:** We like to get as early a lead as possible on any job that is coming up. I do the Dodge Scan, read Construction Reporter, and generally work to track down a job in the preliminary stages.

When I do get onto something I call it to the attention of the proper people and we follow up.

**DIMENSIONS:** Given the high reputation of the Carroll company, you must have a list of preferred customers with whom you can expect a steady flow of business?

**MASON:** Yes, there are several general contractors that we work with on design and build projects and on negotiated guaranteed maximum type projects. They rely on our expertise in our field and we rely on their ability to perform expeditiously and to run a good job.

Surprisingly enough, however, we do quite a few projects with general contractors who are more or less strangers to us. They’re GCs from out of state who come into New Mexico
to do a specific project. Because of our reputation as well as being recommended by another AWCI member from their home area, we get first shot so to speak.

This is one of our most basic reasons for being an association oriented member such as we’ve always been.

**DIMENSIONS:** On the touchy subject of prices. Do preferred customers get a price break—or do you price the customer on the basis of your knowledge?

**MASON:** We don’t do favors price-wise, if that’s what you mean. We bid the conditions as we see them, and a highly reputable general contractor with good management abilities will always get more responsive bids.

**DIMENSIONS:** The 10 years that you’ve been with the Carroll company have been years of change. I should imagine the shift to a diversified profile has been exciting—and exasperating at times?

**MASON:** Construction itself is exciting—and exasperating. But diversification has indeed been very good for us.

These days, we can establish ourselves with the whole job or just part of it. And often, getting a part of a job can lead to better things.

As one example, we got a lead on a local Bank where the general contractor had negotiated the entire 12-story building. We approached the GC, the architect and the owner and let them know that we could design and engineer a panel approach that would look better, save money, and still reflect the design aspects that the architect sought.

Everyone was enthusiastic about our proposal so we designed, engineered and are now in the process of pre-fabricating this project. It is a fast track job. We will have the entire exterior of the building ready to install when they are ready.

The result of all this was that we came in with a job in excess of $500,000—just because we could put together the range of talents and ser-
vices necessary to get the job done better.

Now that’s excitement. So you can see why I love this business and why I can’t think of anything I’d rather do.

DIMENSIONS: Some of the economic ills that are currently ripping up the industry must make coming to work in the morning less than the joy of boom times?

MASON: There is business out there. You need to dig a bit harder, perhaps work a bit longer. But it’s there.

In the last decade we’ve built an entire organization here that simply didn’t exist previously. We diversified, moved into other businesses, took the opportunities when they occurred—and we have something to show for our efforts.

Nor are we done. Given existing problems, we still see a bright future.

DIMENSIONS: From your viewpoint, Carolyn, what do you see as the most serious obstacle for a contractor today?

MASON: Money—and how to best manage it. You must know and understand cash flow like never before or I don’t think you’re going to make it. Contractors can no longer allow collections and retentions to go on as usual.

Times have changed. The interest rates are sufficiently high that they enter into any planning process as an integral component. Ignore the impact of interest and your company will slip away.

Interest rates may come down a bit more—but I don’t see them coming back to 7-8%. Those days apparently are over.

DIMENSIONS: Two elements are affecting the construction industry right now. That’s the union vs. non-union challenge—and the lack of a healthy housing market. As goes housing, so goes the construction in-
dustry, I believe, is the slogan. Do you agree?

MASON: The union and the non-union operator have been contesting for years. There’s nothing different in that. In the last few years, the non-union segment of the construction industry has been making advances, but mostly in housing—at least around here. Lately, it has been encroaching into the commercial and industrial markets. Still, though, I think that reports of the death of union construction are premature.

As to the housing industry pulling the economy up, that seems to have been the pattern for a long time. When houses are being built—and sold—it gives everyone a more robust feeling about the economy.

This, of course, stimulates the furniture and household furnishings markets, the automobile industry, and the roller coaster starts going up the next hill, doesn’t it?

DIMENSIONS: With two children, a house that you’re apparently determined to remodel yourself and an exciting job in a diversified firm—don’t you find that a bit too much? How do you handle this—or do you regard yourself as over programmed?

MASON: Well, a career makes demands on everyone, doesn’t it? I mean my husband, my children and I have managed to carry off the situation with great success... and it’s not any more difficult for me than for any other working woman.

I need to work. I need challenge or I’m not a fulfilled person.

Besides, when we have a meeting at the lumber yard, my presence rules out foul language—and the meetings are shorter. What’s so bad about that?