

Terri Smith: A League of Her Own

By Jamie Nesbitt

New Jersey may be a state known for big hair, strip clubs, landfills, and fictional anxiety-ridden mobsters, but it is also known for being one of the most progressive states in the country when it comes to environmental policy. People can say what they want about the Garden State, but when it comes to issues of cleanup and sustainability, it remains above the bureaucratic fray, taking a decidedly proactive approach to all challenges brown and green. So it is little wonder that industry veteran Terri Smith chose to build her career with the state's Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) before moving to the private sector.

"Over the past few years, NJDEP has actively engaged the community and stakeholders in addressing concerns," says Smith, who is now a redevelopment coordinator with Environmental Liability Management Inc., an environmental engineering and risk management firm. "This is a good sign of their willingness to work through issues and policies." Acting as part broker, part strategist, Smith relishes her new position as intermediary between stakeholders, municipalities, and federal and state regulators, as it affords her the opportunity to broaden her horizons and work on projects across the country. Nowhere else would she be able to work in different disciplines and successfully see a project through, she says.

"There's no downside to the industry," adds Smith, who was recently highlighted as one of the "Women of Influence" in *Real Estate New Jersey*.

That doesn't mean that it's without its share of challenges. Sometimes being the only woman in the room means having to make your presence known and fight to be taken seriously. Smith recalls those occasions when male colleagues would look past her to address other men in the room. Still, those incidents weren't enough to dampen her enthusiasm for the job. She has, however, noticed the glaring absence of women in the boardroom and hopes for a stronger female presence in the years to come, namely in the engineering field.

"If young women have an interest there, they should go for it because the brownfield industry is such a great opportunity," says the married mother of four. "Personally, I love the challenge that working in this field presents and take pride in my successes in the field."

One success she's particularly proud of is an energy-efficient senior housing project in New Jersey that will be completed this summer. Smith says that focusing on energy efficiency helps the community as the sustainability market continues to evolve.

"Green building is a hot button issue and it just makes projects even better," says Smith.

Like most industry veterans, she fell into the business by accident. After receiving an associate degree in business from a New Jersey community college, she went to work for the NJDEP. She started with the Environmental Responsibility Cleanup Act (ECRA) program which, when amended in 1992, became one of the strictest laws in the country, and began working with people just entering the program.

"It was a great learning experience. At the time, ECRA was a pretty big deal. Corporations were merging, which made the issue of liability confusing because we couldn't determine the responsible parties," Smith recalls.

Since then, ECRA—a transaction-based law that says property owners must clean a property before selling—has evolved into the Industrial Site Recovery Act (ISRA).

Eventually, she became a litigation analyst at the agency, crafting the framework for the state's first brownfield program. She remained with the NJDEP for over 17 years before joining Environmental Liability Management Inc.

Smith is currently on a National Brownfield Association's Advisory Board committee working with the U.S. Green Building Council to increase LEED certification points for building on brownfields.

She also sits on the Phoenix Awards executive committee, where she has been an active member for eight years. Again, it gives her the ability to look and marvel at new projects across the country. She loves the idea of having a front-row seat to change.

"You can see where things are going; look at the small 'mom and pop' projects and the larger projects. In the last two rounds we've seen more and more redevelopment projects incorporating green," she says.

Smith considers herself "lucky and blessed" to work in a field she loves. While few people can say that and mean it, her sincerity shines through.

"I love working with communities, helping with properties," she says. "It's all about leaving something better than the way you found it."

