Gender never a problem for this construction boss

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At the end of a day in the blistering Caldwell Parish sun, the construction crew in Columbia is knocking off from work, anxious to wash down some soft drinks that are being delivered to them.

"Here comes the boss now," one worker said as the big Ford sedan pulled to the side of Fisher Road. "That's who you ought to talk to."

The car door opens, but there must be some mistake. Instead of some burly, cigar-chomping construction executive, from the door comes a woman whose soft-spoken grace seems somehow out of place where the dust billows from bulldozers smoothing the surface leading up to a new bridge.

Pat Childress has seen the reaction before. Two years ago in Bossier City, she founded PAC Unlimited Inc., a heavy-construction company specializing in highway, street and bridge projects, and has become a highly successful entrepreneur.

Her stay in Columbia was the result of a half-million-dollar contract funded by the federal government through the state Department of Transportation and Development to replace 10 bridges throughout the parish.

In some respects, it was a return home. She grew up on a Caldwell Parish farm, where she built fences and did whatever other chores were needed on her family's property.

"I was the only child of a father who didn't believe there was a difference between men's work and women's work," she said.

After acquiring a business degree from Northeast Louisiana University in Monroe, she eventually went to work for an employer who was in the oil business. He had a hearing impairment, and Childress frequently accompanied him to business meetings, where she became familiar with construction terms and principles.

"I was his extra set of ears," she said.

Although her company has been awarded many traditional contracts, Childress has had a knack for obtaining contracts that the federal government specially designates to minority businesses.

"I never get into whether that's right or wrong," Childress said of the federal program. "I figure it's the law."

Although Childress said any new construction company must prove itself before gaining widespread acceptance, her gender has never caused any problems as PAC submits bids for various projects.

It's been surprising that the prejudice I expected simply hasn't come up," she said.

Louisiana's depressed economy has been strongly felt in the construction industry.

"It's hurting like it is in any business," she said. "We're doing as well as we can. The profits that were once there aren't around now because people are bidding low just to keep their crews working."

Her husband, Carl Childress, is a logging contractor who helps out as needed with P.A.C. He was on the job at Columbia after another worker left the job.

"He never intended to do anything with P.A.C.," Childress said. "When you lose some key people and you're small to begin with, you have to call in the reserves."

Although her company's office is headquartered in Bossier City, Childress spends most of her time at the construction sites. She balances her career with her family, which includes a son and stepson who are both in college and a 9-year-old daughter.

"Sometimes it's not easy, but you know it's not when you get into it," she said of her career. "We all sit down and talked about it. If I didn't have a cooperative family, it wouldn't work."