

# A Most Constructive

— J.A. Morrissey and

by Cindy Hill



photo: Jan Doerler  
Jeanne Morrissey

## Jeanne Morrissey: A New Vision of Do It Yourself

Jeanne Morrissey, president of the Williston-based construction company J.A. Morrissey, Inc., learned early on to build her own vision rather than trying to fit into someone else's. "I don't want to be part of a club that doesn't want me in it," declares the 51-year-old Morrissey, an innovative businesswoman in a male-dominated trade. "I got used to the fact that I couldn't be part of Little League, because that's just the way it was. I didn't like it, but what are you going to do?"

A self-professed "sports nut," Morrissey grew up in Burlington swimming and playing tennis, basketball, and baseball. She first discovered her ability to forge her own path during her freshman year at Rice Memorial High School. A new family had moved to town whose daughter played tennis, and the mom asked Morrissey when the Rice tennis season started.

"I just laughed," Morrissey recalls. "I said, 'We don't even have a boys' team!' And she said, 'Well what do you

need them for?' So we started a girls' tennis team and I played in that up until I left school.

"If something isn't there for you, don't fight with someone about it. Just do it yourself."

### Escapes and Earthen Dams

Learning that she could create her own way up and out gave Morrissey the courage to leave high school a year early to attend college. "I felt I was stuck in a very limited world, between [being in] Catholic school and being a woman," she explains. Morrissey applied to the University of Vermont (UVM) and was admitted. (Eventually UVM applied the credit she earned in college English toward her missing high school credits so she could obtain her high school diploma.)

At UVM, Morrissey studied civil engineering, in part because it was the only major that fit her life plan. "I was going to build my house and sit in it and then decide what I was going to do," she recalls. "I figured I could be many things in my lifetime but I had

to take care of those fundamentals – food and shelter – first."

After graduating, Morrissey accepted a job offer in California, working for Los Angeles County as a manager in flood control and water conservation. Once settled, she began taking graduate courses in civil engineering at Cal State University in L.A. But graduate school soon proved less than useful.

"I was taking Earthen Dam Design as if it had some sort of meaning in my life," she says wryly. She even switched her course of study to Public Administration before dropping the graduate-school idea altogether. With her professional engineer's license in hand, she headed back to Vermont. "I always intended to come back here to build my house," she explains.

It was 1986, and Morrissey spent her first year back working for the City of Burlington as a project engineer. But the lack of fiscal resources for public projects stifled her idealism. "The reason I am here is to help people," she says. "I tried to do that working for Burlington but I kind of lost my spirit."

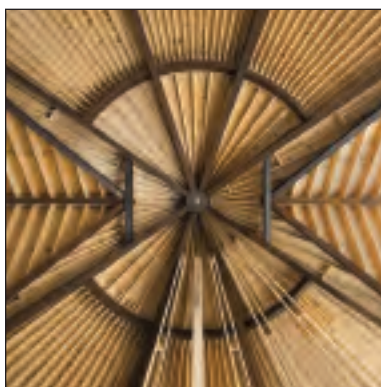
That spirit found temporary revival in private business with Morrissey's next job at Wright & Morrissey, the construction company her grandfather had founded in 1934. Her father had worked at the firm for 40 years. Then her brother Dan took over and invited Jeanne into the company. She believes the experience taught her a major lesson about herself.

"I worked for Dan for a while," she says, "but I realized that, to be happy, I had to be in charge. I was a real pain in his ass. I gave him my eighty hours a week and I love him like a brother, but I told him, 'Instead of trying to shove my wacky ideas down your throat, I'm going to go do this myself.'"

### Wacky Ideas

In 1993, Morrissey left Wright & Morrissey to launch J. A. Morrissey, Inc. One of her main concerns in establishing her own business was to create a positive workplace. As her company motto reads, "The dream is in the team."

"I could make Q-Tips for a living," Morrissey declares. "It wouldn't be *what* we do, it would be *how* we do it. [Our company] would be a feeding ground for how one makes people in a Q-Tip factory happy."



photos: Gary Hall Photography/ except UVM's Old Mill, courtesy of J.A. Morrissey, Inc. Projects by Jeanne Morrissey's construction firm have included everything from new facilities at Fletcher Allen to facelifts of historic UVM buildings.

Morrissey takes several unconventional steps to help her workers stay happy. She assigns project responsibilities according to how they dovetail with employees' needs and lives at the time, rather than relying on the more inflexible system of job titles. And she accommodates her employees' family-related issues. "All human beings ebb and flow," she acknowledges. "[They] have things that happen with family, marriage, health issues with kids."

Morrissey includes her own life in these considerations as well. Her employees are often found on weekends at the house in Richmond she shares with her civil-union partner, and she doesn't hesitate to take her twin 10-year-old boys to the office.

She also pays equal attention to each employee's needs, whether voiced or not. Growing up, says Morrissey, "I noticed a lot of things I didn't like, like the squeaky wheel gets the grease. So one of the things I do here is keep a watchful eye out for the people who don't squeak, and give them some extra grease."

Another of her 'wacky' ideas is to limit the company's size; currently, it has 23 employees. Morrissey notes that when a business gets bigger, its structure and size compel the management to adopt and implement more policies. "Here," she says, "we have few policies and lots of discussions."

Perhaps only one team policy is inflexible. "We have a Humility Rule around here that says no one is allowed to be more than 97 percent sure about anything," Morrissey explains. "There's a three percent chance you are wrong about whatever it might be, from turning off the coffee pot to calling someone



photo: Jan Doerler  
Tiffany Bluemle

back. Righteousness is the death of relationships."

### Collaboration

Relationships in the field are what matter most, in Morrissey's view – not just among her own company's workers, but also with other construction companies. While maintaining positive affiliations with Wright & Morrissey, Morrissey has made it a practice to seek out creative collaborations in every corner of the trade.

One of her most treasured alliances is with Vermont Works for Women (VWW). The non-profit helps girls and women develop their personal potential through exposure to trades not traditionally thought of as "women's work," including construction, plumbing, welding, and law enforcement.

The most recent outcome of Morrissey's professional friendship with VWW's director Tiffany Bluemle

*continued on page 12*



photo: Staci Anne Grove  
A participant in The Vermont Works for Women program "Step-Up Carpentry".

# Joint Venture

## Vermont Works for Women



photo: Jan Doerler  
Women at Work: Tiffany Bluemle and Jeanne Morrissey (at the Vermont Works for Women office built by Morrissey's construction firm).

## Tiffany Bluemle: Bringing Fresh Energy to the Job Site

**T**iffany Bluemle helps Vermont women fall in love – with their jobs. “If you can fall in love with your work, you will accomplish more. And that’s an incredible gift to pass on to your kids,” says Bluemle, executive director of Vermont Works for Women (VWW).

The 23-year old non-profit (originally called Northern New England Tradeswomen) was founded with the idea that women should have access to careers that will support themselves and their family. But according to Bluemle, the heart of the non-profit organization’s mission is to help women and girls find their passion and direction.

Sometimes falling in love with one’s work requires trying something new. Many of VWW’s programs make a point of helping participants of all ages plunge into activities and fields of work they otherwise might fear. Middle-school girls in the summer trades camps might learn to use a welding torch or conquer a ropes course. Older women re-entering the workforce after a life-changing experience – divorce, incarceration, rearing small children – might learn to drive heavy equipment or practice making presentations to potential customers.

“The actual job they get is far less important than having a successful experience and seeing themselves making positive steps forward,” Bluemle says.

“Work is such a centralizing force in our lives,” she continues. “That’s where we form a lot of friendships; [it’s] a place where we find support. It can be creative outlet, make us feel connected to community, help us develop self-esteem. So in some ways work of any kind can be a great vehicle for helping women discern their potential.”

### Stepping Up to a New Career

VWW is funded through a mix of state and federal grants, private and corporate donations, and conference and program fees, serving 900 women each year. Of those, more than half are girls: 400 or so high-schoolers, who attend a conference every year at the Randolph Technical Center, and another 50 middle-school participants in Rosie’s Girls, the summer trades camps whose name is inspired by the World War II poster icon Rosie the Riveter.

“The point of working with girls is that we want them to know a bit about the world out there and what it takes to support themselves,” Bluemle says. “Most will be supporting themselves at some point in their lives and they need to have a sense of what it takes to do that. Also, we help them understand the messages they might be getting, what about them is of value, [and] in some cases [when] to chal-

lenge those messages.”

VWW’s training and employment placement programs also help women to challenge assumptions about work in the trades. But the emphasis is on moving women into paying jobs as swiftly as possible.

With that in mind, VWW’s training programs are designed to direct women toward dependable work. Step Up to Law Enforcement, for example, is a response to the widespread need for female law enforcement officers. Step Up to Painting is a great option for women interested in going into business for themselves because the overhead is relatively low and work prospects are good. “There are a lot of people who make an assumption that women painters are going to be neater and they will be more comfortable letting women into their house,” Bluemle notes.

VWW also runs several programs for women in or leaving incarceration. In one, inmates at the women’s correctional center in St. Albans construct modular homes that are sold as affordable housing to local land trusts or housing authorities. Another is a mentoring program in partnership with Mercy Connections that helps women leaving incarceration find transitional jobs that will help them reintegrate successfully into the community.

“When people come to us, they really need work,” Bluemle explains. “It’s not idle curiosity that motivates their application to us. Most folks need a job and need it quickly.”

### A Green Spring

In the current economic climate, however, landing a job is difficult – especially in the hard-hit building trades. The current building slump means not just that fewer people are going into the field but that there is little pressure on the building trades industry to implement family-friendly practices that would make jobs more accessible to women with children.

“It’s been hard for the industry to adapt to the reality of working parents,” Bluemle explains. “Apprenticeship programs that run in the evening are really hard for the parent who has primary responsibility. Jobsite work usually starts at 7 a.m. Where are you going to put your kids when you need to leave for work? If you don’t have someone else at home to watch the kids, it’s really hard.”

But hope springs eternal, and Mother Nature may be giving women an edge in new career opportunities in environmentally-sound businesses. “The world has changed a lot in the last ten years,” Bluemle says. “With the emphasis on green, there are more opportunities for women to enter nontraditional careers.”

VWW’s Fresh Energy program, launched this past October in partnership with the J. A. Morrissey, Inc. construction firm (see page 10), provides a practical portal into the green trades of renewable-energy and weatherization installation. Funded with start-up grants from the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation and the Great Bay Foundation, Fresh Energy is a hands-on training program designed to be ongoing and self-supporting, involving 12 or more women each year.

“Our Fresh Energy model provides an intact, on-the-job training program which exposes trainees to wide variety of skills and challenges them without relegating them to sweeping the floor,” notes Bluemle. “It’s a great model for

*continued on page 13*

**Lighten Up!  
&  
Read Green**

It's easier than you think to live green.

- Shop locally
- Watch less TV...read a book!
- Switch to Energy Star CFL bulbs\*
- Check out these eco-friendly books and learn more in the Green Living section at Phoenix Books!

\*Phoenix now carries 3-way CFL bulbs to light up your life...green!

A Locally-owned, Independent Bookstore  
At the Essex Shoppes & Cinema  
802.872.7111  
phoenixbooks.biz

## ARTISANS HAND

Fine Vermont Crafts

*Ukrainian eggs*  
Theresa Somerset

89 Main at City Center, Montpelier ~ 802-229-9492

www.artisanshand.com  
online gifts and gift registry

## IS YOUR CAT GETTING OLDER?

A 10 year old cat is equal to 56 year old person. Has your middle aged cat gotten the special care they need?

**Special care includes:**

- Twice yearly exams
- Blood pressure monitoring
- Kidney function testing
- Chest x-rays

For more information or to schedule an appointment  
call 860-CATS(2287)

## Affectionately Cats

Feline Veterinary Hospital and Boarding Suites

60 Commerce St. Williston, VT.

## morrissey

*continued from page 10*

(see page 11) is a collaboration with AllEarth Renewables, a clean-energy technologies company based in Williston. Together, J. A. Morrissey and VWW workers install the company's solar trackers – solar panels designed to be mounted on open ground – in individual homes and small businesses. The collaboration, which may lead to a larger job installing a whole field of solar trackers, has given J. A. Morrissey some solid – and socially positive – work in difficult economic times.

The AllEarth Renewables contract has also allowed Morrissey and her team to provide more on-the-job training for women who might be considering a career in construction. Field training, as Morrissey sees it, is not just about learning to turn wrenches and pour concrete. “I’d like to help them with the back office elements,” she says. “How do you think about and run these things?”

J. A. Morrissey and VWW recently completed another collaboration: an energy-upgrade and weatherization pilot project on 40 units at Northgate Apartments in Burlington. The project was a bit of a homecoming for Morrissey, who served as lead project manager on the 336-unit apartment complex when it was undergoing construction 20 years ago.

“It is an evolution,” Morrissey says of her company's working relationship with VWW. “Tiff and I constantly brainstorm, and this year we’ve had some manifestations of that brainstorming. Vermont Works for Women has become a bit of an extended family for us.”

The relationship goes “way beyond gender,” she adds. “We all still have our individual personalities, and the personalities of their workforce and our workforce. It’s who you are and how you communicate.”

### Beyond Gender

Morrissey's own perspective on gender and work has changed over the years. “When you’re younger, you think there is something you are supposed to be striving for externally in the world,” she says. “Then when you get older, it’s more internal. People’s personal paths, relationships with their partners – in the end for me it’s been very individually, uniquely tweaked. We are all here to contribute something, just from this variety of who we are.”

As one of very few women engineering students in the 1970s, Morrissey witnessed, and personally experienced, “blatant discrimination.” But, rather than confront it, she chose to pursue and realize her own dreams. “I never saw myself as changing [gender discrimination],” she recalls. “I just saw myself finding where I was supposed to be in it.” She identified as a feminist, embracing Gloria Steinem’s dictum that feminism is actually just humanism. Yet even some feminists criticized her for studying something “as patriarchal as engineering.”

“I didn’t succumb to believing what other people believed,” Morrissey concludes. “I was a patient soul. I just knew that I had the opportunity to create my own [version] and let the world be whatever it wanted to be. Freedom lies in not necessarily ignoring that there are those truths, but not adding to their power by trying to fight them directly.”

“Your life becomes its own counter-element to that,” she continues. “If you go where you are wanted and believe there are plenty of places that want you, you’ve just created something that’s an antithesis of the other, rather than shout[ing] it down.”

Sexism, of course, hasn’t gone away. As Morrissey notes, “I answer the phone a lot. People call and ask for Mr. Morrissey. And they assume that if you are a woman answering the phone, you don’t know a lot. So I tell my female staff they are free to hang



up on anyone who is being rude.”

### The Same Side of the Oar

So far, J. A. Morrissey has made it through the recession without layoffs – a remarkable feat in an economy taking a particularly keen toll on the construction industry. Even more surprising, Morrissey has no intention of making cuts – unless from the top down.

“Part of that comes from making something a priority and not living in fear,” she says. “One gentleman asked me some years ago, ‘Is this a last-one-hired, first-one-fired company?’ So I thought for a moment and said, ‘Here’s how I want everyone to think about it. Assume it’s you – always assume it’s you, because I need everyone on the same side of the oar, and the only way to prevent layoffs is to work as efficiently and positively as we can. And that will be our best foot forward at all times.’”

As for her own employees Morrissey says, “I know they are watching these massive layoffs around them, but I told them, ‘We’ll log at my house in downtimes. We are better off if you guys go fishing and kayaking and skiing; if I’m going to lose money I’d rather you have a life. And we’ll cut from the top down.’ The attitude takes the fear away and they aren’t pitted against each other. If we set a tone, they make it happen.”

J. A. Morrissey’s recession-era resiliency comes in part from Morrissey’s management strategy during upturns. “In good times, we made a conscious decision to not grow to the degree of available work, for this very reason,” she explains. “I don’t want to ramp up to a point that’s unsustainable. If you ramp up, ramping down is inevitable. In part, our structure has allowed that vision to manifest. We stopped at a level that’s sustainable.”

That sustainability also arises from J. A. Morrissey’s superb reputation for tailored approaches to specialized building environments. Renovations at Fletcher Allen might involve developing strategies to carry equipment and materials through patient-service areas without creating a nuisance or medical hazard. Restoration of UVM’s historic buildings and porches might entail meticulously replicating antique woodworking details.

“One of the things we do not do is design. We are implementers,” Morrissey says. “I don’t want us to be more than we really are, and that makes it tough to compete, as there are a lot of firms who say they do anything. We go after relationships, because [projects] are all very different. In an old building with lead paint, safety is the critical factor. In the renovation of Higher Ground (the South



Burlington music venue), the choice of materials was left open so working with the owner on that became a key element.

“The one thing in common in all these different projects is that the owners are spending a lot of money, so for them to get value, to be empowered by it, is the most important thing. We have very skilled people, but the key thing is understanding the [client].”

Good relations with everyone

from colleagues to customers has helped to keep J. A. Morrissey sailing in an economy in which many construction firms are barely treading water. But Morrissey quickly acknowledges that running her own business is itself a privilege. “I am acutely aware that many others pre-paved the hardest part of my road. Many women, civil rights activists, labor organizers, and others have fought hard to afford me the chance to try my hand at shaping a small part of the world.” □

### Meet the NEFCU Mortgage Team

## Local, Affordable and On Your Side.

At NEFCU, we believe that you should be able to afford your home while still having money left over for the other important things in life.

When you meet with a member of our mortgage team, they’ll sit down with you and crunch the numbers to make sure that your dreams are aligned with your means. There are so many types of mortgages out there, you’ll want to make sure that you get the mortgage that’s right for you.

Whether you’re in the market for a home loan, or to refinance, be sure to call us first at 879-8790 or visit nefcu.com for more information.



Get pre-approved with no obligation!



**New England  
Federal Credit Union**  
nefcu.com • 879-8790



photos: Staci Anne Grove  
 Vermont Works for Women offers an array of "cutting edge" training programs for women and girls, preparing them for careers in the trade professions.

**bluemle**

*continued from page 11*

training for women or men. But for women, working in an all-female crew can be a great first experience."

VWW staff had been talking to Williston company AllEarth Renewables about how to get more women involved in the field of renewable energy when the opportunity arose to develop methods for installing their solar tracking systems – the square, black units installed in fields that rotate like sunflowers turning with the sun.

"It's a very efficient way to collect solar energy in a place like this," Bluemle says. The devices must be installed uniformly across the field for maximum efficiency, a process that requires backhoe work, pouring concrete, and old-fashioned assembly skills. In addition, each installation would require some back-office skills: project management and coordina-

tion, and communication with the customer as well as with AllEarth Renewables. Bluemle did not hesitate to call on Jeanne Morrissey, owner of J. A. Morrissey, for the necessary support.

"I've known Jeanne Morrissey since I took this job 12 years ago," Bluemle enthuses. "She was an early supporter of our programming. She's an incredible role model. We try to bring her into every Step Up to Carpentry workshop we run because she is a pioneer in her business world, highly successful in her work, and an invaluable member of her community through her work and volunteer activities. She does a great job of encouraging women in our classes. She built the building our classes are in (off Malletts Bay Avenue in Winooski). On the job site there was a woman who managed the project and she employed one of our graduates to do some of the work and helped supervise some female students who came from the building trades program. She gets it. She understands and values our mission."

While setting the groundwork for the AllEarth Renewables installation work, VWW and J. A. Morrissey revisited Northgate Apartments in Burlington. It was a project Jeanne Morrissey and Northern New England Tradeswomen had worked on together 20 years earlier. While the last collaboration at Northgate was characterized by a sense of social justice in providing affordable community housing, this project was painted green: the weatherization work done on the apartment units will save residents fuel costs and lower the development's carbon footprint.

"J. A. Morrissey provided site supervision at Northgate," Bluemle says. "They were our bosses, we were subcontractors. Initially, in your first six months you have a lot to learn to

get into your groove and work as efficiently and effectively as you can, but as we learn more and gain more experience we'll be providing added value. I'm excited about providing this point of access to green jobs for women."

Vermont Works for Women sees job opportunities for women as a positive contribution towards building a better future for the entire state. "Vermont is so small that we need everybody to live up to their own potential," Bluemle says. "We can't just focus on keeping college grads here or bringing in skilled workers from out of state. We have to focus on people here who are underemployed. The trades may not be for everybody, but we don't want to limit the pool of people who might be attracted to it. Think about how you learned about jobs as a kid: if you didn't have an adult plumber or electrician in your family, you didn't think about going into that career."

"It's been a long, hard slog in our country to appreciate the people who do these jobs," Bluemle adds. "Some of the happiest, most fulfilled people I know work with their hands."

*Cindy Hill is a freelance writer in Middlebury.* □



For more information about Vermont Works for Women, visit [www.vtworksforwomen.org](http://www.vtworksforwomen.org). Information is available on this summer's Rosie's Girls camps held at sites in Essex and Barre.

**WHY WAIT?**

Buy Local...  
**Mortgages!**

- Local servicing
- Down payments as low as 3%\*
- Rates are still at an all time low!
- 100% financing available\*\*

Our affordable financing and unique products are made possible with the support of over 10,000 credit union members and socially responsible investors.

\*credit score dependent.  
 \*\*location restrictions apply for these USDA Rural Development loans

**Apply Today!**  
 Find forms online at [www.oppsvt.org](http://www.oppsvt.org)  
 or call Ashley at 865-2003 x102 for more information.

**21**  
**Opportunities**  
 CREDIT UNION  
 We don't say no, we say when

**NCUA** 92 North Avenue, Burlington, VT 05401  
 802-865-2003 • [www.oppsvt.org](http://www.oppsvt.org)

**Classic & Ancient Spa Therapies**

DETOX RELAX REJUVINATE

Voted one of **TOP TEN GREEN SPAS** around the world by *Organic Spa Magazine*

Jivana is a holistic spa offering a variety of organic spa and wellness treatments.

**jivana**  
 HOLISTIC SPA  
 DETOXIFICATION & REJUVENATION THERAPIES

113 Church Street, Burlington, VT • 802-660-4772 • [jivanaspa.com](http://jivanaspa.com)