



Office of Civil Rights

As Strong as Steel

Caltrans Office of Civil Rights spotlights Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Marvella Steel Placers, and its CEO, Jacqueline Pruitt.

Now a successful small business owner, Jacqueline Pruitt was in and out of jail for years until age 23, when her parole officer and mother sent her to the Phoenix Rehabilitation House.

One week before being arrested the final time in 2003, the now 20-year sober addict said she had reached her breaking point and prayed to God to ask Him to remove her from the life she was living. He answered.

“I was ready for a different way of living,” she said. “I kept my mind open, and my mouth closed.”

She spent the next 31 weeks learning life skills, attending [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) (AA) meetings, and becoming a functioning sober adult. After graduation, [the Phoenix House](#) offered Pruitt a job. She worked there for four years until she had an impactful conversation with a friend during the Great Recession, in 2008.

“I was looking for a career change when I saw a friend in construction clothes and asked how much they made,” Pruitt said. “They said \$60 an hour, and I said, ‘Where do I sign up?’”

In 2009, the Long Beach resident started a four-year apprenticeship program at the University of Iron, Local 416, where she learned everything she could about rebar. Rebar is steel reinforcing rods used to hold concrete together, despite any cracks or fractures that may occur over time.

Her male counterparts challenged her and told her a woman couldn’t work rebar as well as a man, which she said made her want to succeed at it even more. Pruitt developed a relatable quality of rebar itself: resilience.

“I had to be mentally strong, before becoming physically strong to work just like a man would work,” Pruitt said. “Before I knew it, the guys were saying, ‘She’s here to stay. Let’s mold her.’”



Early in her apprenticeship, Jacqueline realized she wanted to run her own rebar business, so she researched online, found the [Los Angeles Regional Contractor Development and Bonding Program](#), and attended webinars and boot camps to learn how to successfully contract with different general contractors.

She became a lead ironworker on freeway lane additions, bridges, abutments, retaining walls, and barrier rail on State Route (SR)-91 in Southern California; as well as the Port of Los Angeles Berth 200 Rail Yard Project, the Port of Long Beach state-of-the-art Container Terminal and Middle Harbor Project, and the Wilshire Grand Center slab on metal decks (SOMD) project.

After becoming a certified Journeyman Ironworker in 2013, she helped deliver the Hollywood Park Casino – on time and under budget.

In 2016, she passed the Contractor’s State License Board test and established [Marvella Steel Placers](#), which is a certified small, disadvantaged, woman, minority, local, LGBT-owned company. Pruitt named the company after her mother who passed away seven months after she became an ironworker.

“She is my eyes in the skies,” she said. “She loved me unconditionally and believed in me when I did not believe in myself.”

In 2022, Marvella Steel Placers’ 25 employees completed \$7 million worth of work. The business is awarded about 15% of the jobs bid on, but she attributes her success to her tenacity, perseverance, and attention to detail.

“I am a small business, competing against multi-million contractors who can take on a low bid just to keep their guys busy,” she said. “My advice to other small businesses is to hold their price, but get familiar with the general contractors, and send them capability statements every time they send out a bid. Call them or go to their office so they can put a face to your name.”

On June 1, 2023, BuildOUT California [awarded](#) Pruitt the President’s Award of Achievement. As director of the National Association of Minority Contractors of Southern California, she co-founded the Construction Contractors Alliance (CCA), Inc., to grow and develop underutilized construction businesses at their nexus with underrepresented populations and underserved communities. Pruitt is President of CCA, which is on the California High-Speed Rail Business Advisory Council. She is also a member of the Metro Transportation Business Council, and the California Black Chamber of Commerce, which is a member of the Caltrans Small Business Council.

“Marvella Steel Placers gives me an opportunity to be a part of something bigger than myself,” Pruitt said. “I apply the principles of AA to every part of my life. It works [the business is successful] if I work it. I see it as being of service. I employ people, which allows them to provide for their families. And we work on projects that build hospitals, freeways – and will improve the lives of others for generations to come.”

Visit Caltrans’ Civil Rights program webpage to get certified as a [Disadvantaged Business Enterprise](#), or visit the Department of General Services [Cal eProcure](#) website for information on [Small Business Certification](#).