

Construction Angels

by Michael Downes
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Life in the construction industry is inherently dangerous. Working around heavy machinery, traffic, hazardous materials and at heights takes extreme caution and safety protocols.

Today's utility and construction companies put safety above all else, but risk can never be reduced to zero, and accidents do happen.

But when tragedy strikes, who helps the families of fallen construction workers?

That's the void Kristi Gibbs, whose family has been in the construction industry since 1939, decided to fill when she founded Construction Angels.

Kristi, the Florida-based non-profit's CEO and national executive director, came up with the idea for Construction Angels somewhat by accident while attending an industry trade show in 2009.

"I was walking around meeting people and ran into a woman collecting money for 'one of our own' recently killed on a job site, who left behind a wife and two kids," Kirsti said. "I thought it was a charity."

The woman was collecting direct donations for a family affected by a construction-related death, but it turns out she wasn't part of a wider effort to support fallen workers.

"I did some looking, and found out there was no real charity for construction workers," Kristi said.

Kristi spent a great deal of time researching construction deaths across the country and came up with a shocking number — nearly 12 construction-related fatalities occur in the United States every day. That's 12 families whose spouse or parent doesn't come home from work every day.

The idea behind Construction Angels is to help families pick up the pieces and get back on their feet after a tragedy.

The organization acts quickly to help put families in touch with

grief counselors and provide family financial aid. Other services include a scholarship fund and a list of Fallen Angels that is curated on the organization's website that often includes obituary information and individual fundraising efforts, for example, if a family creates a GoFundMe page.

It took a few years to get the non-profit off the ground, but Kristi has been full-time with the organization for the last five years, after first stepping down as president of a construction networking organization, then from her primary job in the construction field. She now dedicates her time to helping families heal.

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The non-profit is funded largely by donations from industry, with most of the funds coming from fund raising events like golf tournaments that are hosted by various organizations — construction companies, suppliers, real estate developers, utility owner-operators and trade unions.

The dedication to the cause doesn't end with Kristi. In fact, her husband, Richie Gibbs, recently hosted a fundraising event in Michigan that raised more than \$20,000 for the organization. He is president of Gianetti Contracting Corp. and is also a Construction Angels board member.

"He did that all himself," she said. "I didn't even have to go up there to raise the funds."

The amount of money available to families after a tragedy is dependent on how much has been raised in the state where the family lives. Each state's funds are kept separate, so typically the money raised through fundraisers stays in that state's branch of Construction Angels. In Ohio, the current family financial aid available to families is \$2500, but branches are able to offer up to \$5000 in more established states.

Kristi said they're currently operating in 11 states and the District of Columbia and plan to expand to all 50 states in the next ten years. Construction Angels currently has three employees and dozens of volunteers. As they continue to expand, they are looking for national sponsors to take the organization to the next level.

The organization has helped families of workers in all types of construction, including utility construction.

"Many of the families we've helped are in road construction or slips and falls from high rises and trench collapses. Several have been dump trucks backing over workers," Kristi said. "Many of the One Call Centers are getting on board, and the National Underground Utility Contractors Association supports us on a national level."

In addition to the immediate financial benefit and offer of grief counseling to the affected families, Construction Angels also raises safety awareness and raises awareness about the number of fatalities that occur each year — and provides companies with a toolbox of ideas on how to prevent them from happening.

"We've raised a lot of awareness, even general public, who are surprised there are so many fatalities each year," Kristi said.

To get involved, contact Kristi at kristi.gibbs@constructionangels.us or visit the organization's website at www.constructionangels.us. 