

Frederick Factor Season 2 Episode 2: The Vibrance Factor with Sandra Hofmeister of A&S Construction

Ashleigh: Welcome to the Frederick Factor. My name is Ashleigh Kiggans, and I'm the host of Season 2. Everyone who's lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick, Maryland knows there's just something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible diverse community that continues to grow. Here on this podcast, we bring you Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight, share their stories with you, and find out: what's their Frederick Factor?

I am here with Sandra Hofmeister. She owns A&S Construction, one of the construction roofing companies in the area local to Frederick. Pretty exciting -- probably the only female-owned, and not only that, Hispanic female-owned construction companies in potentially the whole state of Maryland. Definitely here in Frederick, Maryland. Welcome, Sandra.

Sandra: Hey, Ashley, it's a pleasure to be here.

Ashleigh: So you're obviously not from Frederick, so what brought you here to Frederick?

Sandra: I always say that life is an unexpected journey, and it is. <laughs>. I moved to Frederick in 2010 after living in Florida for a few years. I was working in accounting for a manufacturing company [inaudible] until they filed bankruptcy after the crisis in 2009. And they closed the company. My boyfriend at that time, who is now my husband, lived here in Maryland, and I decided to move with him and the rest of history. <laughs>

Ashleigh: Well, good history, right?

Sandra: Yes. <laughs>

Ashleigh: So tell me a little bit how you ended up [in Frederick]. So you're originally from Peru?

Sandra: Yes.

Ashleigh: How did you end up in the construction industry? I know your background is more in the corporate world. So how did you make that shift into construction? Two very different worlds.

Sandra: Oh yeah, absolutely. This is another example of how life can surprise you, right? So when I moved to Fredrick, I decided to take my time and get to know the city, the people, and get used to it, because this was all new. Especially snow -- I cannot drive with snow, period. That is hard! <laughs>. So when I was ready, I decided to look for a job. Unfortunately, in my field of accounting, most positions offered were far away, like in DC, Baltimore, around Rockville, Bethesda, sometimes Virginia. And I didn't want to drive so far and so many hours away from home. So when I applied to a construction company as an admin, that's how I started. I did it because it was just 15 minutes away from home. And I was excited to learn

something different, but being the Hispanic girl wasn't easy. Looking back, I wonder why I didn't quit, but I'm not quitter. I'm the person who loves the challenge, and this was a big one. So I learned the trade. My purpose was to thrive and be the best. And over time, I became the production manager, and I was overseeing crews, jobs, jobs purchasing, production, and I loved it.

Ashleigh: Awesome. All right. So, you were in the construction industry working for another company, and now, obviously you own your own construction company where A&S comes in. So what inspired you to decide to start your own construction company?

Sandra: So, another twist in my life...

Ashleigh: <laughs>. I'm liking all these twists. It's very much like it should be a movie. It's very exciting.

Sandra: Yes, yes. Everything is a surprise. You never know what's happening tomorrow. So after nine and a half years -- almost 10 -- COVID hits and I was let go in mid-2020. So I must say that I'm very grateful to my ex-employer. He and his family -- they're very dear to me. And then I got another job, but it didn't work out either. And so the guys that were working for me knocked on my door and said how much they missed me and that they needed me. They said that I know the whole thing, so why don't I start my own company? I was like -- I'm not sure about that. So I thought about it for a while, talked to my husband, and this is how A&S was born. It was January 2021.

Ashleigh: So really COVID may have been a positive for you because it gave you that opportunity to take a leap you may not have been able to take. As entrepreneurs all know, sometimes it's hard to leave the stable position to say, "Okay, I want to venture into something." But it almost helps to get that kind of force or little kick in the butt of "you've gotta do this."

Sandra: I needed a push because, like you said, I worked for corporate for so long all my life. I always worked for somebody else. I had my task, my routine, I knew what to do, then I went home and I collected my money. So now it's a different ball game. Every day, I rule my own day, I do my own schedule. I go out and do my stuff. I don't report to anybody else. It's totally different.

Ashleigh: It's a freedom. It gives you this freedom to make your own decisions, make your own rules, things like that.

Sandra: I know. It's scary too.

Ashleigh: Yeah, it is. Well, one of the things you and I have bonded over is that we are some of the "onlys" in our industry.

Sandra: The unicorns! <laughs>.

Ashleigh: That's the perfect word. The unicorns. With me being in the commercial field and being a black female and you being a Hispanic female and not only in the construction industry, but owning a construction company. So can you speak to what it's like to be underrepresented in your industry?

Sandra: Sure. So this is an opportunity to embrace who I am -- not only as a woman, but as a minority. I was raised to be tough. Coming from a mixed family, having a European father and a Peruvian mother, I kind of understand what it is to be different. When I was little, I remember [having] this sense of, "I don't belong anywhere" because in my country, I was too white for them. So they kind of rejected me a little bit. But then when I moved to the US, I'm not white, I'm not black, I'm kind of in between. So I felt like I didn't belong either. So I had to figure out how to navigate this new world. And, and on top of that, I'm working in a male-dominated industry.
<laughs>

For some people, the fact that I am a woman can be a threat or they just simply won't hire me because they are expecting the guy at their door. Some people wouldn't even look at me or talk to me when I'm doing a presentation or an estimate. However, most customers choose me because I'm a minority; because I'm a woman. And I guess they feel represented, especially the female customers. And very often, I get [feedback like] -- "You're unbelievable. This is great."
<laughs> I know that I'm not going to get every job because there is this misconception that a roofer should be a guy. So if they don't feel comfortable with me, then I won't get the job just like that. I just need to live with that. But for the people who give me the chance and hire me, they recommend me. And this is how I get my jobs -- because they see me in action and they know that I know what I do. And being a woman gives me the extra sauce because --

Ashleigh: <laughs>

Sandra: We are -- and you know this -- we're very detailed, focused, multitaskers, talented, thinking-outside-the-box, and especially caring. And that makes a huge difference. And I'm hopeful that I'm somehow shaping the future for the upcoming generations of awesome women.

Ashleigh: Absolutely. And one of the great things to see, once again, through COVID -- I hate to always go back to that -- but one of the great things that's come out of that has been the community support and the pushing efforts to promote minority and diverse businesses, women-owned businesses, disabled-owned businesses, veteran-owned businesses, all all those different types of categories that fall into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. And [there has been a great push] for those groups. And so it was a great time to start because people are looking for: who is the female-owned company; who's the minority-owned company? And so, it's one of the great things that we've seen.

Sponsorship Message

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Ashleigh: So leading on to that and how we've seen it happen in 2020, 2021, and 2022, how do you feel that maybe we can continue this in Frederick and continue that diversity and inclusion throughout the entire county?

Sandra: That's a great question, and I put a lot of thought into that because I think that Frederick is doing a great job in welcoming minorities and diverse groups as well as businesses. And this is really, really good. And I think this will continue since the authorities are very open to listen to our recommendations to improve these matters in our county. Like the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Advisory Board. So this is awesome. I haven't seen that in other places. I call Frederick a melting pot because we come here from different backgrounds, different places. Some people come from very, very far away -- [and have] other cultures and religions. And we all just thrive together, work together, and get closer and help each other. That's one of the coolest things about Frederick.

Ashleigh: And there are so many groups out there and so many support groups and so many nonprofit groups. It's probably been in the last five or six years that I've learned how truly diverse Frederick is -- especially the Frederick City area. And how many wide ranges of backgrounds and cultures and religions and everything that we have here. And it's been great to see how that's continued to grow into this community.

Sandra: And people here love local. People here love what is around [Frederick]. When someone is on Facebook or something asking for, like a farm, for example, and then everybody recommends somebody, you realize, "Oh my gosh, we're surrounded by these beautiful companies or businesses or people and they help each other out." Or when a pet gets lost, everybody's looking for that pet. This is Frederick. It is phenomenal.

Ashleigh: It's a very tight community. It's almost like the small-town-everybody-knows-your-name type of situation. <laughs>. [Even] when they truly don't [know your name]. But when you walk in somewhere, there's that friendly feeling or vibe. I mean, like [what we experienced when] you and I were locked out of our building this morning <laughs> to come in and record this podcast.

Sandra: And nobody attacked us. <laughs>

Ashleigh: And we went into a neighboring business and we said, “Hey, we’re not here to buy anything, but can we cut through your business?” And they say: “Oh, absolutely. Come on in, go through.” And so, it’s just those types of things that are those little moments and little 30-second encounters that make you remember [how great Frederick is].

Sandra: It’s the feeling of a small town. I was born in a very big city, like 10 million people or so. And I know how hectic it is to take the bus, take the metro. You’re always running or rushing and pushing people. No kidding. And there is no sense of trust because there are so many people. So you don’t know who is a good or a bad guy. But here, you feel safe walking outside. You’re not looking over your shoulder to see who’s behind you. That’s the magic of Frederick.

Ashleigh: Yeah, absolutely. Well, and speaking of the magic of Frederick -- obviously, we’ve talked a lot about what makes Frederick special -- but if you had to pick something particular to be your Frederick Factor, what would that be?

Sandra: One of the many things is that Frederick has a diverse and vibrant community. And the fact that you have everything here. Frederick is richly diverse and charming city. I like to think of Frederick as a big city in a small town with one of the most beautiful downtowns I’ve ever seen. This is Frederick to me. And I travel a lot. I know a lot of places -- different continents and what not. But this is just one of my favorite places.

Ashleigh: So are you saying that Frederick is maybe one of the best places in the world?
<laughs>

Sandra: I think so, yes. I think because it’s like the feeling of a big city that is very modern in certain ways. For example, look at this business here. I would never think that we’d have this huge place in Frederick. People who don’t know Frederick think that this is a small town in western Maryland. When people think about Maryland, they’re thinking [about places like] Baltimore or Bethesda or Rockville or Montgomery County. But nobody puts Frederick on the map. And then every time I walk downtown, I fall in love. It’s just a super neat town. It’s old with a lot of history. It’s rich and diverse now because people like you and I are here making this better.

Ashleigh: Yeah, absolutely. And there have been so many new minority businesses that have opened up in the last few years and so many based right here in Frederick.

Sandra: The extra sauce baby! <laughs>

Ashleigh: The extra sauce. <laughs> Right here in the Frederick area. Back in 2012/2013, when I was working in DC and I was living in Frederick, I would tell my clients in DC that I lived in Frederick. And [I would get] comments and the looks of confusion of, “Why in the world would you live up there?” All the comments. And then I’d think to myself, “Well, no, I do want to live

there because how is a place ever going to have diversity? How is it ever going to have inclusion if there aren't diverse people there or if there's nothing there to really start that off?"

Sandra: Yes. We are not living in the 18th century anymore. This is the 21st century.

Ashleigh: And like you said, we may be the first, but we will not be the last in our industries to do this.

Sandra: Nope. We are just shaping the way for someone else. You have to be brave and I will be so happy to help somebody or mentor somebody in time. Because they might need this knowledge that you and I are acquiring now for the next generations.

Ashleigh: Absolutely. Well, Sandra, I want to thank you so much for being here.

Sandra: Thank you for having me.

Ashleigh: I pulled her at a networking event and said, "I have to have you on Season Two!" So thank you for agreeing with my crazy [push] of "You have to be here. You have to be here. Please, please come join me." I'm very happy to have you.

Sandra: Thank you so much, Ashleigh. For those of you who don't know Ashleigh -- [though] I think everybody knows Ashley -- she's this phenomenal female, full of energy and inspiring. So I'm very humbled and happy to be here with you today.

Ashleigh: Well, thank you. Thank you. The feeling is very mutual for sure. Thank you guys and this is Ashleigh Kiggins for Season Two of the Frederick Factor, and we will talk to you soon.

You've been listening to the Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community that makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at www.frederickfactor.com. 'Til next time.