

Folsom, Calif., Permit Tech is a Cure for the Building Permit Blues

Michelle Menszer didn't start out wanting to work in a building department for the city of Folsom, a small suburb of Sacramento, Calif.

She wanted to be a nurse, comforting and educating people in need. And while that career path didn't work out, Menszer was able to channel her compassion, humor and energy into one of the most difficult, and seldom appreciated, front-line jobs in the building field: permit technician working the front counter.

It doesn't get much tougher, but Menszer has tackled her job well enough to be named Sacramento Valley Association of Building Officials' 2015 Permit Tech of the Year. But she nearly didn't make the ceremony in December.

"My boss Steve Burger kept telling me, 'You really should go to this.' But it was the day after my 40th birthday party, so I wasn't too interested at first. Then I said,

'What the heck?' and I'm glad I did. I was so honored and excited."

Burger, Folsom's Chief Building Official, said the pleasure has been all his working with Menszer for the past six years.

"When I came here from Phoenix, I left a permit tech who could have helped me rule the world," Burger remembered. "I said, 'What am I going to do without her?' Then I met Michelle, and I said, 'I have another one.' I am truly blessed."

Susan Dowty, ICC's Government Relations Manager in Brea, California, was impressed with Menszer after Burger introduced them at the event.

"She is an engaging, welcoming, intelligent woman," Dowty said. "I just met her, and I could have talked to her all night."



Dowty said it's important to recognize permit technicians since they are on the front lines of building departments, and often the first faces the public sees when they come with a project or a problem.

"And it's good they see Michelle," Dowty said. "She has that 'can-do' spirit."

By Nick Reiher

Folsom, Calif., Permit Tech is a Cure for the Building Permit Blues *continued*

Menszer loves what she's doing and where she's doing it. She once compared working the front desk as a permit tech to the "Nutcracker's" Sugar Plum Fairy, who spends most of her time with kids pulling on her sleeves, answering questions—all with a smile on her face.

Not surprisingly, then, Menszer handles the intensity of the job by making a game of it.

"I call the front desk 'The E.R.,'" she said. "It's like triage. 'Oh, we have a bleeder here. This one can wait. You take this one.'

"I genuinely love working with people. And we joke we could make a reality show out of the front desk. All we need to do is put up a camera."

Menszer thought she was destined to work in a real emergency room at one point after graduating from high school. She worked as a coordinator for a laser and skin surgery center during school, but when she learned the waiting list to get into nursing school was two to three years, she took a job as a human resources coordinator for AT&T Wireless.

There, Menszer got a taste of working with employees on policies and helping to find solutions to their problems, as well as using her organizational skills setting up classes and handling personnel files.

Early on, she also got into massage, both for humans and horses. Yes, she was, and is, a certified horse massager.

"I grew up on a ranch," she said. "I had a horse when I was young. I always loved horses. When you gain their trust, they just relax and go with it. Just let go. I wish people could do that."

In 2000, she took a job as a Permit Technician and Project Management Coordinator at Carlton Engineering, Inc., with a focus on the coordinator part. Menszer realized she liked organizing and coordinating.

"I never wanted to be an engineer," Menszer said. "And I didn't know much about engineering. But I worked my way up, and I learned how to do plan reviews."

As part of her job, she also started attending the Sacramento Valley Association of Building Officials meetings to do some networking. "It was good to meet building officials, and it was good they met me. Sometimes, they don't have any idea what goes on at the counter; how the codes they pass affect us there."

After some eight years with Carlton Engineering, Menszer eyed a project coordinator job with the city of Folsom. Unfortunately, she said, they eliminated that job when the economy tanked.

Menszer could have sung "Folsom Prison Blues," but instead she made the best, and then some, of being a permit tech with the city. She and colleagues have reviewed many plans at the counter there, and sometimes, if the project qualifies, they can have a plan approved the same day.

"We can't do that for every project; we can't do it for residential," she said. "But when we can do it, people really like it."

Menszer acknowledges working the counter can be difficult at times, like massaging a tense horse, or one of its stubborn cousins.

"But I am confident enough now that when I tell someone something, they'll listen," she said. "I'll tell them firmly, but nicely. I have a rule: I'll tell them the same thing three times. If they still won't listen, I'll get my boss, and he'll tell them the same thing. Then, they're fine. That gets to me though. I have to step away for a while."

Burger said he's watched Menszer conquer most of the challenges she's tackled. "It is fun working with someone who wants to do more, instead of someone who just wants to be here," he said. "I have a truly great staff. I really hope more permit techs take the initiative like Michelle does."

Menszer says it's important during challenging times to have Burger's support. "He tells us the building officials wouldn't be able to do their jobs unless they had us on the front lines," she said.

Menszer said she's ready to offer that kind of support now that she won't be at the counter as much. With the economy doing better, the city of Folsom again needed a Project Coordinator, and she finally got her dream job.

"I'll be looking at all the projects now," she said, "making sure they are on schedule and according to budget. But I'm not going to leave the permit techs in the lurch. I'll be there to help them when they need it. I know how it can get up there."

Burger knows the permit techs will be in good hands with Menszer.

"She's like their den mother," he said. "Michelle always steps up." **BSJO**