Bad Midwest Feminist Podcast - Episode 5

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HOST: Hey, Bad Midwest Feminist listeners. If you hail from the great state of Missouri or have simply heard of it, I'm sure you've heard the play on words which compare Missouri to misery. As a Midwesterner, I find it sad that Missouri receives this jokey criticism. Missouri is home to many events and landmarks that set it apart from the rest of the Midwest. It's the setting for the critically acclaimed novel, “Gone Girl.” It has the Ozarks. It has Kansas City barbecue. And an infinitely challenging freeway system.

It's also home to James Huster, a part-time construction worker and Missouri resident with Missouri roots through and through. DataUSA lists the most common Missouri resident as a white male who works in the business of construction business. And that's what led to my Zoom call with James. He's worked with the same family-owned swimming pool construction business for about eight years, and I wanted to hear just what a common Missouri male resident thinks about feminism in the Midwest. So, let's get into it.

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HOST: James, do you identify as a feminist?

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JAMES HUSTER: I don’t, I wouldn’t necessarily say I would, no.

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HOST: Yeah. Yeah. Can you speak as to why?

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HUSTER: Well, I guess. Well, let me ask you this. Now, what is your definition of a feminist?

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HOST: That's a great question, I think. And I'm going to turn it back to you. I'm going to say, like, what's your definition of feminism? How do you view it?

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HUSTER: To be quite honest with you, I don't know that I ever really thought about it, you know, and I mean, I guess it's the women's ability to be able to do any, you know, form or tasks that a man can do, if you will. You know, and I don't necessarily disagree that they can't do it. It's more of a matter of they don't; most women don't want to do the types of work that men do. So.

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HOST: Would you say that you then identify with how you view it?

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HUSTER: I would say so. Yeah.

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HOST: So, have you seen feminism at all show up in the construction industry? I know you only do it part-time, but in what ways have you might have seen it? Or have you seen it at all?

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HUSTER: Honestly, and with what I do and with it being such a small company. I can't honestly say that I've really seen it. Yeah. I mean, you know, so far, there's just not that many, you know, women in the workforce. I mean, we're talking about a company that employs two people, three people, when I'm around. So again, it's not like there's a large employment base.

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HOST: But the company that you work for, it is, it is open to hiring, hiring women?

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HUSTER: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I mean, again, we're talking about a really small company. Like we do maybe like, complete six to eight pools a year. So, you know, we start one pool, we finish it, we go to the next one. So it's not like we have multiple projects going on at the same time. You know, there may be a little bit of overlap. And I mean, honestly, at one time, my niece had actually, you know, inquired about possibly doing it. And, you know, after we kind of told her what was involved with that, she was like, 'Yeah, I don't think that's something that I really want to do.' So.

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HOST: Why do you think that is?

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HUSTER: Again, it's more, in my opinion, it is more of a, she don't want to work out in the heat, don't want to work out what it's cold. It's manual labor. I'm not saying that she couldn't do the labor because I think she could, because she has certainly helped me with other manual labor jobs and projects, you know, around my house, her house, that type of thing. But for something that she would want to do on a regular basis, that just wasn't something that she was interested in doing.

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HOST: Yeah. Do you think construction could be something that more, that more women would be interested in, but there are some ways that it's lacking?

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HUSTER: Women don't necessarily want to do the task of the construction work itself. I don't think it's their inability to do it. I think it's they don't want to do it. You know, construction is a dirty, it's a dirty business, you know? You know, when I get off work, I come home, and, you

know, I take a shower and all the dirt comes off of me. You know, and, you know, whether I'm sitting on an escalator, digging the pool or I'm cutting the steel or doing whatever, at the end of the day, it's a dirty job. And most women, I'm sorry, don't want to get dirty.

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HOST: Now, so, you've lived in, you've lived in Missouri your whole life?

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HUSTER: Yes.

HOST: Yeah. You got, you got Missouri roots through and through?

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HUSTER: Oh, yeah.

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HOST: How do you think you've seen feminism show up differently in Missouri than maybe, like, elsewhere in the U.S.? Maybe. How, how is feminism? How do you think your definition of feminism is different in Missouri or just in the Midwest than, say, the coasts?

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HUSTER: Well, more so, because I mean, I haven't necessarily done any of the construction portion of that in East or West Coast. I think it's the same type of thing, you know, regardless of where you're at, Midwest or East or West Coast, I think it's, you know, at the end of the day, women, they just don't want to do that type of job. They say they do. But when they get into it, you know, and they and they realize the, the, the physical aspect of it, at the end of the day, they just don't want to do that type of a job.

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DASHAE ENGLER: Hey, everyone. I'm Dashae Engler, editor in chief of Urban Plains. Please check out my podcast, "A Dignified Life." In this three-part series, I dive into what gender-affirming care really looks like for trans Iowans and Illinoisans. I sit down with two trans led organizations and an Illinois resident to talk about the realities and barriers that they face. However, there's a question that covers the whole entire podcast. Is it access shaped more by state or by the people in it? You can listen to the full series on our website.

06:04
EMMETT MCMENAMY: Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

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HOST: So you have, so you have, you know, women in your life, women, in your family that, you know, you, you know, that you're close to, that, that are in your life. Would you, and you, and you already kind of touched on this because you said that you have a niece. Would you recommend construction as a field that they could potentially go into?

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HUSTER: Yes. If that is an interest to them, absolutely. I don't think that there's anything that would necessarily hold them back. You know, I do know somebody that is kind of in that type of a field. You know, a female that is in a highly dominated, you know, male industry. And she has more of that, I'll call it the tomboy mentality. So, I think it depends on the type of person as to whether or not that's, you know, would it even be a fit for them. Now, don't get me wrong. The the bigger construction industry, you know, that certainly has more employees, if you will. And so I being a guy, I know that guys are not always the, how do I want to say it.

They, the politest of people, you could say. Yeah. So, you know, that doesn't necessarily reflect myself. You know, I do have all the utmost respect for anybody and everybody, regardless of what their gender is. But, I would say in general, the, the, you know, the male-dominated fields like that, you know, guys are going to be guys and they're going to do their thing, if you will. Even though you say women aren't super interested in in the construction industry and it is mainly, there's quite a lot of men in the field.

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HOST: Do you do you still think that there's room for feminism, though, even, even if there is a lack of female representation?

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HUSTER: I would say there's always room for that. You know, I mean, I don't, you know, are you able to do the job? Yes or no? And, you know, if you can do it, great. If you can't, then sorry. It's time to move on. But in the same realm of kind of what you're speaking to is, you know, I feel like women say, want to make the complaint that, well, I'm not there's not enough women in the construction field. Well, if you have the field where, say, 80% is male, and 90% of the applicants are male, your pool is small. And again, I've seen some women in the construction field, but it's not you know, they're, they're able and capable of doing that job, you know, some of them enjoy it.

You know, like my niece. She thoroughly enjoyed it. You know, I had her over to my house or my mother's house, when we did a small retaining wall, you know, outside. You know, landscaping. And she thoroughly enjoyed it, but she's like, I don't want to do this every day. She's a little girl. I mean, she's, but maybe 120 pounds. You know, 5'2, 5'3, you know, this little thing, and I'm going, well, 'Can you bring me that 75-pound brick?' to do the wall? No. 'Can you put it in the wheelbarrow so I can wheel it out to you?' Yeah, sure. I can do that. Yeah. No. Versus me, I can walk up to the pile of bricks and pick up, you know, the 75, 80 pound brick and, you know, carry it back and forth, ya know, most of the day.

10:05
HOST: And that concludes the fifth episode of Bad Midwest Feminist. Many thanks to James Huster for lending us his time. James thinks that there's nothing stopping a woman, or anyone, for that matter, from starting a career in construction. It's not something he's witnessed a lot, but it can happen. Are male construction workers known for being general supporters of feminism? Stereotypically, not really. Talking with James inspired me to do some reading about the jobs he was talking about. And of course, he's right. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women only make up 11 to 12% of all construction workers. And is that in any way half or even a plurality? No! But is it because there are attitudes in the construction industry that may present as unfriendly, and women lack internal support in the industry?

That's what organizations like the Midwest chapter of the American Subcontractors Association, a council dedicated to serving as a resource of support and networking for women in the construction industry, are trying to do. And their tagline is, 'She's Built For This.' 11 or 12% showcases that there are women who want to get dirty. That construction, a male-dominated industry, is something that interests them. That there are men who will accept their talents and contributions in the field. This conversation was really enlightening for me. I chatted with a person who doesn't align with the feminist label, and feminism isn't something that he thinks about in its construction work. But maybe now that we talked about it, he will.

And that's how that works. Not every conversation about feminism is going to go perfectly. This one, as a matter of fact, was lacking in places. But hey, that's why I ask you to make of the episode what you will. Think about it. See if it resonates. Leave what doesn't, and always keep talking. Now, let me leave you with a piece of wisdom from James. "Regardless of whether you're male or female, I think you can do whatever you want." Do with that what you will, and until then, I'm Caroline Siebels-Lindquist with Urban Plains Magazine, asking you to just keep talking.