

# THE FIRST AND ONLY FEMALE MASTER TECH ROBYNN NEHL BREAKS THE GLASS CEILING



By Vicki Jones  
Editor, Door + Access Systems Newsmagazine

*The Institute of Door Dealer Education and Accreditation (IDEA) certifies professionals in a variety of disciplines in the door, access system, and automated vehicular gate industries. To become a certified Master Technician in the industry, professionals must complete certification courses and exams in the following areas: Residential Installer, Commercial Sectional Door Systems Technician, Commercial Rolling Door Systems Technician, and Rolling Steel Fire Door Technician.*

As of June 2019, there were 124 IDEA-certified Master Technicians in the door industry, and only one is female. Her name is Robynn Nehl, and she works for Overhead Door Company of Gillette in Gillette, Wyoming.

While the overall number of Master Technicians changes frequently, as more people in the industry fulfill the requirements for certification, the number of female Master Technicians doesn't appear to be changing much at all.

Robynn earned her Master Technician Certification from IDEA in August 2016, and in the three years since her achievement, no other female has completed the program. This makes Robynn Nehl's story groundbreaking. It also highlights the sluggish pace of the changing gender demographics of our industry.

## Important background

Robynn's father, Bruce, and his two brothers started in the garage door

industry in 1974. The three siblings decided to open individual branches in Rapid City, South Dakota, and Gillette, Wyoming. In 1978, Bruce and his wife, Nancy, purchased and became sole owners of Overhead Door Company of Gillette. In 2006, Bruce passed away, and Nancy continued running the company.

## Her story

Robynn basically grew up in the industry. "I remember always being at the shop when I was little. I spent all my summers working or hanging out there," she said.

When she was as young as seven years old, Robynn would accompany her dad to job sites. As she got older, she would assist the more senior techs as well. "I was the official helper. They would let me do random tasks like hardwiring doors and operators or assisting in any other way I could. When I was a kid in the shop, my favorite job was when I ran the broom," Robynn said.

▼ Lifting doors, or any product, for that matter, has never been an issue for Robynn.



▲ Robynn proudly displays her Master Tech certification on the company truck.



◀ Young Robynn and her brother Kayce out on a job after the custom overlay doors were installed.

After years of unofficially working for Overhead Door, Robynn left the small town of Gillette for Denver, where she attended the Bel-Rea Institute of Animal Technology to pursue a veterinary technician degree.

After completing the vet tech program and spending four years in the “big city,” she returned home to Gillette and to her door industry roots. She began working full time as a technician for her mom at Overhead Door in 2012. She tried working as a vet tech for a year, but the door industry ultimately reeled her back in.

Today, there are seven employees at Overhead Door Company of Gillette, and two of them—Robynn and her brother, Kayce—have earned their Master Tech certifications. According to their mom/boss, Nancy, “They both wanted to obtain their master tech certifications, so I encouraged them to do it. In an industry where there are many family-owned businesses with extremely qualified techs, a company with certified technicians sets us apart.”

### Benefits of accreditation

Certification is a relatively new option for companies in the gate and door industries. IDEA was founded by the International Door Association, the Door & Access Systems Manufacturers Association, and the American

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**“Although I know there is at least one more out there who is on her way to becoming a Master Tech. I met her a while ago. She started pursuing her certification before me. This makes me confident that there are more female Master Techs to come. I know of many owners in the industry who have no reservations hiring female technicians. They just need to apply, and there will be opportunities for them to prove themselves just like I’m doing.”**



Rolling Door Institute in July 1996. On May 14, 1997, the first accreditation exams were administered at the International Garage Door Exposition in Nashville, Tennessee. IDEA introduced the Master Automated Access System Technicians Certification in September 2011. (For more “Key moments in IDEA history,” see pp. 50.)

More and more companies are looking to validate their businesses through third-party certification opportunities. The number of gate and door professionals pursuing Master Tech-level certification is lower but steadily increasing, according to IDEA Managing Director Debra Welhener.

“In the first year we started recognizing techs holding all four door certifications as Master Techs, there were only 11. Currently, there are 124 Master Techs, which includes the U.S. and Canada,” said Welhener.

“The designation is something our Master Techs are very proud of, as they should be. But anyone seeking and completing a certification should be proud of their accomplishment, whether it be one or all four certifications,” Welhener said.

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### Surprised customers

Robynn admits that some customers are surprised when she arrives at their homes or businesses to work on or install their doors. When asked whether her sex has ever affected her ability to complete a job, she laughed, saying, “No, never. I have always been able to complete the job. Lifting doors, or any product, for that matter, has also never been an issue,” she added.

Despite her experience and ability, Robynn recalled one case when the customer actually refused to let her do the job. She said, “I called the homeowner in advance to let her know when I would be arriving. At that time, the customer questioned whether I would be doing the job. When I said yes, she insisted that a male technician go instead.”

Robynn wasn’t as much surprised by the customer’s request as amused. She knew she could do the job just as well as any male technician. Unfortunately, there was no persuading this particular homeowner to give her a chance.

### Proving herself

By about the same time as this particular customer request occurred, Robynn had completed half of the exams required for the Master Tech Certification. This incident simply added fuel to complete the program even faster.

In total, it took Robynn 18 months to complete all the tests needed to be a certified Master Technician. She noted that much of that time was spent determining locations to take the varying tests.

“Even though I had been in the industry for years, preparing and taking the exams was a great way for me to review things I already knew. It also helped highlight some areas that I, initially, maybe didn’t consider that important. Ultimately, I discovered more about what I needed to know through the certification process,” she said.

Robynn now has six years under her belt as a tech, three of those as a Master Technician. Her certification is displayed on the company truck, so customers can clearly see that she is an accredited technician. According to Robynn, this helps give her immediate credibility and hopefully it negates any reservations a customer may have about a female technician arriving on the job site.

When asked, “Are you surprised no other female has completed the master tech certification program since you did it three years ago?” Robynn’s response was an incredulous “Yes! Although I know there is at least one more out there who is on her way to becoming a Master Tech. I met her a while ago. She started pursuing her certification before me. This makes me confident that there are more female Master Techs to come. I know of many owners in the industry who have no reservations hiring female technicians. They just need to apply, and there will be opportunities for them to prove themselves just like I’m doing.”

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*Editor’s note:*

*The disproportionate number of women in the industry continues to be disconcerting. If Robynn is right, and more owners are ready to hire women, this is an exciting time for our industry. For this shift to occur, all of us need to start encouraging young women to consider the door industry as a career path. Additionally, we need to not only welcome female newcomers, but we also need to treat them as equals.*

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# KEY MOMENTS IN IDEA HISTORY



## MILESTONES

- July 1996 ▶ IDEA is founded by the International Door Association, Door & Access Systems Manufacturers Association, and the American Rolling Door Institute.
- May 1997 ▶ The first accreditation exams are administered at the International Garage Door Exposition in Nashville, Tenn.
- 1998 ▶ The first IDEA educational workshops are presented at International Garage Door Exposition. In all, 11 seminars are attended by a total of 205 participants.
- April 1999 ▶ IDEA workshops at the Expo in Toronto achieve the largest educational turnout to date, with a total headcount of 1,581.
- April 2001 ▶ The first IDEA Train-the-Trainer class is presented at the Atlantic City Expo.
- April 2002 ▶ The first IDEA Residential Installer Certification exams are given at the Expo in Nashville, Tenn.
- May 2004 ▶ The first IDEA Rolling Steel Fire Door Technician Certification exams are given at the Expo in Las Vegas. This is also the first Expo in which two full days are devoted to education. 34 seminars are presented, with total attendance at 3,000.
- 2005 ▶ IDEA produces the DoorTech Residential Sectional Garage Door Installer Training DVD Program.
- May 2006 ▶ The first IDEA Commercial Sectional Door Systems Technician Certification exams are given at the Expo in Las Vegas.
- March 2008 ▶ IDEA launches the Gate Operator Installer Certification program.
- May 2008 ▶ IDEA certifies the first Commercial Rolling Door Systems Technicians.
- Late 2008 ▶ The U.S. Department of Labor approves the IDEA Automated Access Systems Technician Apprenticeship Program.
- 2009 ▶ IDEA produces the State of Utah Contractors License S222 Examination Preparation study guide.
- 2010 ▶ IDEA produces DoorTech Commercial Operator Troubleshooting DVD.
- August 2011 ▶ The first Certified Door Dealer Consultant certification is issued, marking the first IDEA program for manufacturer sales representatives.
- September 2011 ▶ IDEA introduces the Master Automated Access Systems Technician status for those earning certifications in Residential, Commercial Sectional, Commercial Rolling, and Rolling Steel Fire Doors.
- Expo 2013 ▶ The first 2-day school is conducted for Commercial Rolling/Rolling Steel Fire doors.
- July 2013 ▶ IDEA issues first Gate Systems Designer Certifications.
- Expo 2014 ▶ The first 2-day school is conducted for Residential/Commercial Sectional doors.
- August 2016 ▶ The first woman earns Master Technician Certification.

