

# The DBJ Interview: How Dallas entrepreneur Gail Warrior is building a new brand

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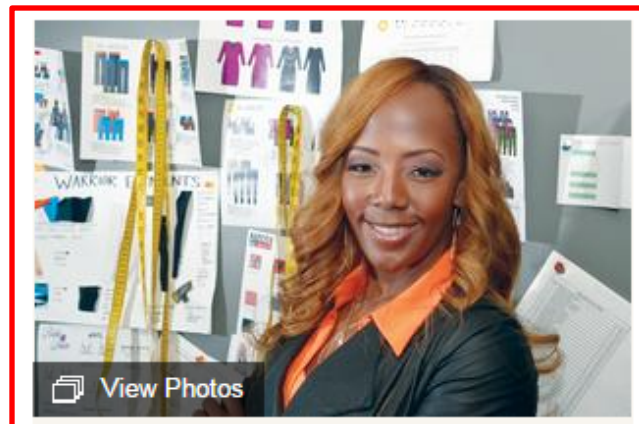
Gail Warrior has held many titles in her life: Boss. Mother. Even former body builder.


But there's one that probably suits her best: Entrepreneur.

She started a construction- management business in a male-dominated industry, founding Warrior Group in 1997. She grew the Dallas-based company gradually until she landed her share of a \$40 million contract in 2006 to provide modular Army barracks for Fort Bliss in El Paso.

Today, Warrior Group pulls in more than \$150 million in revenue every year.

But it hasn't always been simple. Warrior says she sometimes feels as if she takes a step forward just to be knocked back three steps. But her diligence and confidence have been vital to building Warrior Group into one of the largest woman-owned construction businesses in the country.



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*Jake Dean*

Warrior Group CEO Gail Warrior known for her expertise in modular construction, she is now thinking beyond the box to build a new brand.

And she isn't looking to slow down. Warrior just launched an integrated lifestyle company called Warrior Elements, which includes workout clothing. For \$80, women can sport a tricot crop top, and for \$115, shoppers can get a pair of ruched capri pants. Eventually, Elements will include a workout video, cookbook and guide to help women manage their time and efforts.

The Dallas Business Journal sat down with Warrior to talk about her businesses and what's next.

**Construction was your first business. How did you get into that field?**

Before I started Warrior Group, I was working in corporate America for Mobil Oil. I always tell people that construction found me, I didn't find it. I came from an entrepreneurial family and my dad was an entrepreneur. So opening my own business was something that I always aspired to, but I didn't think it was going to be in construction.

I was at dinner one night with some friends who owned a manufacturing facility and we were talking about modular buildings being sold to the federal government. My friends owned a facility in DeSoto and grew their business doing a lot of portable buildings for school systems and large general contractors. But no one was specializing in permanent modular construction or modular buildings for long-term use, and no one was marketing to the federal government. So in 1997, I formed a company, and that's what we started doing.

**From there, how did you break into the industry and start getting big contracts?**

A lot of Army bases were closing and realigning, and a lot of troops were being consolidated into different locations around the U.S. The military realized they didn't have enough living quarters for them, and the existing bases' buildings had been there since World War II. They realized they needed new spaces built in a short time frame, and to do that kind of construction from the ground up would have taken years to complete.

I literally happened to be in the right place at the right time when modular construction was a big need.

We partnered with a large contracting firm, Hensel Phelps, and worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for our first project at Fort Bliss, a two-story barracks.

From there, the Corps loved our team, the product, the efficiency and that the buildings had a 30-year lifespan. We then went to Fort Sam Houston (\$47 million overall contract), Fort Polk (\$24 million) and Fort Carson (\$45 million).

**Construction is such a male-dominated field. What struggles have you had to overcome as a woman and a minority in the industry?**

I would never call them struggles. I'd call them opportunities. I don't have a problem with being a woman or a minority in construction, so at that point it's not my problem. It's the other person's problem.

The only experience I really had was when we were going after some venture capital money, and as part of the due diligence process, one of the funders wanted to interview me and the executive team. Two men talked with my team, which consisted of myself, an African-American man and two Caucasian men. I was the only woman in the room.

One of the men looked at me and asked if I was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the company. And I didn't say this to him, but I thought to myself: If I were a man, would you still be asking me? I just simply said, "How about we let the rest of the people on my executive team walk out of the room. Any other questions you have, just ask me directly. In the end, I'll let you decide if I'm responsible for the day-to-day operations."

Immediately, he backed off and said he didn't mean anything by it. And I thought "I'm sure you didn't!"

For me, overcoming any type of barrier has to start from within. Often times as a woman or a minority, the reason why we never get out of the gate is because we give ourselves so much negative self-talk about why we shouldn't, couldn't or what road blocks we could have. Or, we get out of the gate, and we don't have the confidence, so as soon as we falter, we go right back to the gate.

**You've branched out from construction. Tell me about your newest venture.**

We did a soft launch of Warrior Elements, an integrated lifestyle company, on Nov. 11.

People are always asking me how I'm able to work out, stay healthy, do fitness competitions, run a construction company, be a single mom raising a teenage son, have a charity foundation, eat healthy and be nearly 50 years old.

The way that I'm able to do all that is through what I call the Warrior 360 model. It's all about mind, body and soul with a lot of organization and planning. If you were to walk into the closet in my room, everything that I'm going to wear for the week is already laid out, because I do that on the weekends.

My food for the week is also already prepped. My team and I are developing a cookbook that talks about fueling the warrior within and how to cook meals on Sundays.

The life that I live takes a lot of discipline, pre-planning and thought. None of it happens by accident. The purpose of Warrior Elements is to show women how they can do the same things and have a completely fulfilling life.

People will say they don't have time to work out or cook at home or participate on a board. Warrior Elements shows women how to get that time.

**Can you tell me more about the clothing line you also created with Warrior Elements?**

I've always loved fashion, working out and helping others, and the clothing line is a way to fuse all of that into one.

Each of the pieces is identified by a different element. We debuted with fire and water pieces and we have earth and wind samples in production. We hope those will be ready in January 2015. We already have some pre-orders.

We also have some graphic T-shirt designs and a prototype exercise video that will launch next year.

It's all about strengthening your inner warrior. I believe every woman has a warrior dying to come out in one shape or another. Maybe a woman wants to know how to exercise or eat better. Or maybe a woman wants to go out and start a business.

Before I went out and created this clothing line, I did all of the design. The manufacturer is a local woman-owned company, so the line is designed by a woman and made by a woman for women. We are online, and we do several trunk shows. So it's happening, and it's a dream come true.

**But you're not just a businesswoman. What about your work as a philanthropist?**

In 2007, I formed Heart of a Warrior Charitable Foundation. Both of my parents were very instrumental in where I am today, and they instilled into me the importance of learning and gaining an education, because with education and learning comes power. By power, I mean that there's nothing that you can't do in life if you put your mind to it.

I'm from Dallas and I grew up in Hamilton Park and the church there. I wanted to do something that would be a legacy to my mom and dad and the fact that they taught so much to my siblings and me.

We started in Hamilton Park and now we are in four locations in Dallas. It's a science, technology, engineering and mathematics-based program. The half-day program is free to families and the full-day program is \$30 per week. That includes a seven- to eight-week summer program and students are provided with breakfast, lunch and a snack. Our student-teacher ratio is 10 to 1 and the learning style that we use is an active-style of learning. Students aren't just sitting at a desk. They're engaged hands-on, to the point that they don't realize that they're learning because they're having so much fun.

We also incorporate field trips and do a fun fit day. We have trainers from Equinox gym talk about the importance of healthy eating and that healthy food can actually taste good, even though it's good for you. We also do fun exercises and drills, which the kids love.

### **It sounds like you're already busy. Do you have any more projects coming up?**

That's not enough? On the construction side, we're working on a joint venture with Beck for a new student center on the University of North Texas at Dallas campus. That is due to be complete toward the end of 2015.

### **What others are saying ...**

Gail Warrior has been recognized and honored by organizations around the country. Many of those who know her praise her work ethic.

**"Gail Warrior represents the ideal woman entrepreneur in the eyes of Texas Women Ventures. We invested in Gail many years ago because we believed in her, her company's strategic plan and because she was a community and civic leader."**

**Whitney Johns Martin**, co-founder of Texas Women Ventures

**"Gail has always been a wonderful friend to Dallas Black Dance Theatre. ... She is a sharp businesswoman and a compassionate philanthropist."**

**Ann Williams**, founder, Dallas Black Dance Theatre

**"As CEO of the Warrior Group, Gail had the courage to enter a field considered non-traditional for a woman. She is constantly seeking to do more and make a difference."**

**Margo Posey**, president of the Dallas/Fort Worth Minority Supplier Development Council