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AERIE Corp. brings women to the drafting table

Association says female engineers still uncommon nationwide

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While technological advances are raising the profile of — and the need for — skilled engineers, females are still struggling to break the glass ceiling in the field, according to a recent study.

The National Association of Engineers reports that only 9% of engineers in America are women and only 20% of engineering degrees are earned by women. Like the rest of the country, female engineers are few and far between in the GSA area, but the women at AERIE Corp. say being in the minority doesn't have to be a disadvantage.

AERIE, located in Greenville, is owned by Lori Morton, P.E., and she says to her knowledge, her firm is the only certified women-owned engineering firm in the GSA area.

AERIE Corp. provides a variety of services including machine design, drafting, AutoCAD, engineering analysis and electronic document management solutions.

"We help manufacturing companies with tooling and fixture design, process improvements, equipment installations and product design," Morton says. "We also offer project management, technical writing and customized Access databases."

Some of AERIE's GSA clients include General Electric, Alcoa Fujikura, and Fuji Film.

Morton says she accidentally discovered engineering. "I always had an affinity for math and drawing, even as a young girl. My dad had a two-year degree in electrical engineering and he encouraged me to go into that field," she says.

After beginning her college career as a recreation major, Morton decided to switch schools and majors. She transferred to NC State and majored in electrical engineering.

She soon realized electrical engineering wasn't for her. The one class she enjoyed at NC State was drafting. She then changed her course of study to mechanical engineering.

A flair for the mechanical

"It turns out that I was actually well-suited for mechanical engineering. I had an affinity for building things and tearing things apart to see how they worked. When I was a kid, I would build wooden race cars with scrap wheels and scrap wood I would scrounge up," she says.

"I even had my own business at age 11, repairing bicycles for the neighborhood kids," she says. "I would charge 10 cents to fix a flat and five cents to lubricate and tighten chains, wheels, and handlebars. It was in my blood all along, it just took some time to figure it out for myself."

Morton says that she didn't feel any effects of being a female engineer until she graduated from college and entered the work force. "One thing that could be a disadvantage or advantage is that as a minority, everything I did was magnified. I received much more attention because I was a female working in a predominately male field," she says.

She says in some ways, here gender brought with it more perks than drawbacks. "I feel that I performed very near the same level as my male counterparts, but because I was a woman, I received a lot of positive recognition," she says. "This actually helped me advance in my career.

However, she adds that the extra attention could have been a drawback had she done an inadequate job. "(That) would have been amplified as well to my detriment," Morton says.

Increasing the female ranks

The National Academy of Engineering reports that due to a shortage of skilled workers in the field, women will be essential to prevent a lag in the number of engineering experts that are working in the future.

The NAE also says female engineers are beneficial for many companies because they bring different perspectives to the table.

Morton says her clients have no problem hiring female engineers. "My clients treat me and my business with a high degree of professionalism," she says.

While she agrees that engineering is still largely a male-dominated profession, she sees women gradually becoming more prominent in the field. "Many top-notch post-secondary schools are encouraging young women to enter the engineering profession by providing support groups, mentoring programs and educational seminars. The reason there are still so few women engineers has more to do with socialization of young girls (than) education or aptitude," Morton says.

Morton has eight employees, including several women, and says many females who enter the engineering field are drawn to chemical engineering or computer sciences.

"Still, in this day and age, young girls are encouraged to enter the softer fields and leave the math and sciences to the boys," she says. "This is changing, but you can't change culture overnight, or even over a generation." 85