

The Art of Engineering with Denise McIntosh

Episode 003: Stephanie Wilkins, Co-Owner of [Pharmaconsult US](#)

[Stephanie Wilkins](#) was encouraged at a young age to look into subjects like drafting and auto repair. She quickly picked up knowledge and skills, and soon found herself working in companies while surrounded by men. Stephanie discovered working in the corporate world was quite different from the experiences she had learning from her early mentors, though she never once considered being a woman a limitation. She and host Denise McIntosh discuss the progress that's been made for women in the engineering and manufacturing industries.

Denise McIntosh *Well, hello. Today, my guest is Stephanie Wilkins, who is co-founder and owner of [Pharmaconsult US](#). Most of her life lived in New Jersey, now is in a more comfortable place in South Carolina on the coast. So welcome, Stephanie.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Thank you, Denise.*

Denise McIntosh *I'm just always curious about engineering people, and how they get started in engineering, and what drives them there. So how did you get there?*

Stephanie Wilkins *So it's kind of an interesting, strange story. I actually got on my path to engineering from my high school track coach. So in my sophomore year of high school, I had a study hall, and he was teaching a drafting class and he suggested that instead of my study hall, I come into his drafting class.*

So I went into his drafting class, and you have to understand that, you know, track is a spring sport. His class was a year long. So I went into the class with it, you know, halfway through the year. And it was interesting because he treated me as if I was there the whole year. So I think, like, on day three he had a test for the class, which of course he made me take. And, to put it mildly, I did horrible on that first test. But I did enjoy the class. And it was eye-opening because in my youth, my father was not a mechanical, hands-on person. Certainly my mother was not. So I didn't have any exposure to engineering or any mechanical-type work in my youth other than through, you know, like I said, it started with my high school track coach. So then in my junior and senior years of high school, I took further engineering and drafting classes and hard sciences, chemistry, and physics, and really enjoyed them and did well.

And so my track coach got me started, but another big influence was my engineering teacher, Mr. Lake, because he cheered me on all the way through college acceptance.

And, funny story, in high school I had missed a lab in physics and my physics teacher was an interesting sort. He told me that I had to make up that lab and I had to do it, you know, off-hours, and he wasn't going to help. So it was not a lab you could do by yourself. I think it was kinetics. So Mr. Lake came into the lab with me, which certainly shocked my physics teacher, but he deserved it because he was really just trying to be a little chauvinistic about the whole thing.

So, you know, so through my high school is where I got introduced to engineering. So then I did apply to college, actually, to do architecture of all things. But after probably a semester in college, realized that I really wanted to be in engineering, and the engineering-side, not the architectural-design-side.

Denise McIntosh *Interesting. So one of the other things that you and I spoke about yesterday that I thought was just fascinating, because you and I are fairly similar ages.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Right.*

Denise McIntosh *And we've grown up in both industries that were male dominated, but tell me about your experience in the auto supply store.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Yes. So high school time, and this was certainly a different track. I think that it might've even been my freshman year of high school. Yeah. I was looking for a job. So I wound up getting hired by a place called Car Parts in our local town, which supplied automotive parts to, you know, it was retail. It wasn't a wholesale place.*

And I started there and I was really supposed to be just like a receptionist-type person, answering the phones and, you know, greeting guests, and maybe stocking shelves. But, as I was there, my coworkers and the owners were all fabulous and were really eager to teach me whatever I wanted to learn. And, actually, one of the people that I worked with there was a high school auto mechanics teacher at my local high school.

So we all got along terrifically and, you know, they taught me everything they could and they, and at this point, again, like I've said, my father was not a mechanical person. He did not even change his own oil. That was all done by others. So, you know, I had no exposure to the inside of a car. So in the shop they had a motor sitting out, you know, sample motors. So they would, you know, explain to me the different parts and all those kinds of things. And, you know, I would listen to them working with people. And so I was getting to the point where I could tell somebody how to change their spark plugs, or even a starter, with never, ever having done it myself. And, you know, so it was really

fun from that aspect 'cause I was learning something that was way, way outside of what I ever imagined myself learning.

And, you know, I would still be answering phones. And at this point, like I said, I was able to sell, you know, and handle the customers. The phone would ring and I would answer the phone and, you know, I'd get a guy on the phone saying, "Can I speak to someone?" It's like, "Well, you are speaking to someone," you know? And then it's like, "No, somebody that knows something." I said, "Well, I know things." And, you know, so it would go on like that. And, you know, over the course of my time there, because I did stay there throughout my high school years, you know, I had people that would come and ask for me. The company would run sales looking for, you know, sales goals and competitions, and often I would win them. So, you know, it was a really fun place. And, you know, it taught me a lot and I never, you know, until many years later even put it together with the engineering side of my life. So, very fond memories of my time at Car Parts.

Denise McIntosh *Well, so I can imagine that having that experience in dealing with what had to have been a ninety-five percent male customer list, well, you certainly had no fear, obviously. But going into engineering school, I can only imagine you weren't one of many women.*

Stephanie Wilkins *No. When I went to [Penn State](#), no, there weren't very many women. And, you know, I think I have to step back a bit and explain. My father never, ever, he has four daughters, and he never made any of us feel like there was something we couldn't do because we were girls. I never heard, "Well, you're a girl. You can't do that," ever. And he was really good at understanding what each of our capabilities were, or are, and making sure that we were working to them. I still remember back when I went to school, around sometime in seventh or eighth grade, you had to make a decision if you were going to go the college route, go to a technical school, or just go to the workforce. And then that would set the type of schooling you would have in high school.*

And I remember sitting down with my mom and dad and, you know, they're like, "Okay, well, what do you want to do?" And I said, "Well, I want to be a legal secretary." So my father's like, "No way," he goes, "because you can be the lawyer." He goes, "You shoot for the stars. And if you fall to the clouds, fine, but do not shoot for the ground." So I really have to give my father a lot of credit. I didn't realize, you know, his impact, you know, until much later in my life, but, like I said, my sisters and I never heard, "Well, you're a girl. You can't do that," ever.

Denise McIntosh *That's fascinating because I, same as you, grew up with three sisters and no brothers on a farm. And there was, yes, I don't recall any conversation that included, "Well, you can't do that because you're a girl."*

Stephanie Wilkins *Right.*

Denise McIntosh *I mean, we were expected to do everything there was to do, and we did everything there was to do.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Right.*

Denise McIntosh *But you're right. I think we both lucked out in having parents that didn't look any differently at what our possibilities and opportunities were.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Yeah. I couldn't agree more. You know, because like I said, yeah, my father was cheering me on, you know, from the get-go and you didn't know it, but, as you know, you matured and stuff, you saw that and, you know, knowing that, or sensing that growing up, you know, gave you a confidence. So like, I, you know, I walked around in college for a lot of it, and yeah. And even in my early work experience, I was always kind of oblivious to the prejudice or chauvinism to women because I never had experienced it growing up. So it had to hit me pretty hard on the head to go, "Wait a minute, you're doing that because I'm a woman, not because I'm not capable." So it's kind of interesting.*

Denise McIntosh *So did anything change when you got into your job life?*

Stephanie Wilkins *Again, you know, I had to be hit over the head to know that I was being slighted because I was a woman. Right? So, you know, I just would, you know, go ahead like, I, you know, was in charge. If, you know, like I was working at a small consulting firm, and I remember going to the site to see a facility we were going to renovate, and the architect was there, and he was not much older than I was. I mean, I was, you know... fresh. I was out of school maybe a year, two years max, and I don't believe he was ten years out of school, for sure. And I still remember, he was like, "Is this your first job?" But it never dawned on me, you know, that he was, you know, maybe because I was a woman, taking more offense.*

And, you know, I had to deal with, you know, in a lot of these sites or even a lot of, you know, the contractors and even some of the clients, architects, you know, calling you "honey" and "babe", and things like that. And, early on, I kind of put it in my head that at over a certain age, that guy isn't going to change, and I'm just not going to address it

*with them. But if they were below that age, they got it right back at them. So you know, I learned those things, but it was interesting because I never saw being a woman as a way to stop me from doing anything, you know? I had, you know, incidences where, you know, looking back, you know, there might've been some prejudice, but it never stopped me. Now, because of that, there were times when, you know, I was considered a b****, or I was, you know, being emotional or whatever, because, you know, I would stand my ground, or I wouldn't take crap that I shouldn't take. But because I was a woman, these men would think, you know, that's not how I'm supposed to act. So I would, you know, get a lot of that. And at the time, and when I was going through it, I did not really understand that. And it was frustrating.*

So through, you know, especially the early part of my career, I would go through phases where I would be me, and I would, you know, say what it is that needs to be done and just take charge. And then there would be times when, you know, I would get knocked around and I'd have to, you know, sit back and say, "Okay, maybe I need to tone it down," or things like that. And it's interesting cause I just finished reading a book by Glennon Doyle, "Untamed", and it just put everything into perspective. It was, you know, really about, you know, society has put labels on what, you know, girls and women should be, which, you know, are submissive, and take back seats, and things like that. And guys are good to be aggressive and take charge and be competitive. And those are not necessarily the way it should be. Some guys could be sensitive and, you know, take a back seat and some women could be the "take charge competitive." So reading that book helped me to understand some of the struggles I had early on in my career.

Denise McIntosh *Well, and I agree. I think sometimes our emotions get mistaken, you know? We're passionate about what we do, and who we are. And, you're right, I think all of those things should just be tossed around in a jar because we all, I don't care if you're male or female, some days we take a back seat, and some days we are the stepping out one, and we all should celebrate that on either side.*

Stephanie Wilkins *I agree. I mean, it's sad that, you know, we have to unlearn, you know, these things that are kind of ingrained into us. You know, 'cause even from a guy side, you know, like, it's not okay for a guy to be sensitive. Well, that's a bunch of crap, you know?*

Denise McIntosh *Yes.*

Stephanie Wilkins *So, you know, again, when I was going through it, it just didn't hit me that these were the things going on. It was just, you know, okay, you know, it was me. I know, you know, I can be very opinionated, I can take charge, and things like that.*

And there were times when, you know, I just had to, you know, if people were really beating me around, "Okay, let me just step back and get the lay of the land." But they didn't keep me down for long.

Denise McIntosh *No. Well, I think I mentioned in the first podcast about a conversation I had with a customer, very early on in my career, who asked me how I felt about taking a man's job, and I thankfully didn't answer while I was there. But I really did have to think about where that comes from. And he didn't raise girls. And we were in a farming community. And so it's, you know, it's made me ponder. And I'm glad you mentioned that book because I think we do all need to reexamine how far we've come and how much we still have to do. But I think there is as much welcoming men to the kind, empathetic side.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Yes, I agree. And your story reminds me of a story when I was at Penn State in an engineering mechanics class. I was sitting at the table, and next to me was a guy, and then on the other side of him was another girl. And we had just gotten some tests back. And so the guy got a D on his test and, you know, myself and the other woman, we at least had Cs. I don't remember the exact grades. And, you know, he kind of looked at us and he told us, "You know, women belong home barefoot and pregnant." And so we both looked at him and said, "Well, it looks like we belong here more than you do." So... You know? And that was probably the very first time that I had somebody say directly to me something, you know, that, you know, basically was like, you know, "Women don't belong in this field."*

Denise McIntosh *Yes. So how long did you spend in the corporate world?*

Stephanie Wilkins *The corporate world. So right out of Penn State, I went to a large consulting company in Pennsylvania, and was there for a little over a year, then went to another consultant. So I was in consulting companies up until 1999 when I was pregnant with my last child. And my husband, at the time, had actually, while I was getting ready to go on maternity leave, he lost his job. And so, you know, he was trying to figure out, you know, what he should do. And so at that point, I said to him, "Why don't you start your own company?" So in September of 1999, he started Pharmaconsult US. And, you know, did okay. And then I was on maternity leave. I had my son in November of '99 and then just never went back to my consulting company. I stayed and helped, you know, my husband with the company. And then once the little guy was old enough to, you know, go to some daycare school setting then, you know, really came on full-time and never looked back.*

Denise McIntosh *Interesting. So I know that job has taken you all over the world.*

Stephanie Wilkins Yes.

Denise McIntosh So, any places that you've been in the world and that were surprisingly either accepting or unaccepting of your gender in your job?

Stephanie Wilkins Well, I think what was surprising to me was going to places such as Japan and India, where women are not necessarily seen as equals, and certainly not in an engineering capacity, but still being respected as an expert. So, you know, I saw more of that rather than being pushed aside.

Denise McIntosh Good. So who were your influencers? You mentioned the ones from high school and college.

Stephanie Wilkins So some of my work influencers... I had one of my old bosses for probably, you know, maybe six, seven, eight years. Dan Morissette, he's since passed, but he really opened my eyes at how hard I was working and what I was achieving compared to my peers. And, you know, was trying to open my eyes on understanding my worth to the company where, you know, I did not see it as valuable as he was trying to show me.

The company that I worked for at the time, the president, he was definitely a chauvinist. And he, it was weird because he didn't know how to handle me, because here I was a female, but I was able to do things. So anytime there was a special project, he would get me to do this special project, even if it was totally outside my realm. Like, at one point he had me working with the accounting group to set up reporting. Well, I didn't know accounting, I didn't know the software, anything, but I was able to do it. And, but when it came time for the rewards, whether it was in pay or other benefits, like, I was doing project management, and in that company, all project managers got a company car. Well, I didn't. Okay?

So it was interesting having, you know, Michael, the president who was, you know, definitely showing, you know, bias, and Dan there cheering me on and showing me, "No, you are worth more than anyone else here with your work ethic and your ability." So Dan was absolutely a big influencer, but equally I'd have to say Michael probably was too because he opened my eyes to, you know, you've got to make sure you speak up for yourself, which, you know, leads me to a story when when I was at that company.

I had found that one of my coworkers who, which was a guy, did not have a college degree and was making more than I was. And we had basically the same job. So when I

found that out, I went to my immediate supervisor and I said, "I want to know why he's making more than I am." And so my boss says, "Well, he's faster than you are." I'm like, "Okay, fine." So I go away and I do my research, and I find out that he's not doing proper engineering, he's using rule of thumb. So I go back to my boss and I said, "Okay, either you want me to do it fast, or you want me to do it right. Which one do you want?" And so, you know, he's kind of a little speechless. And he didn't really, you know, he listened to me, but, you know, did not get a raise. So I waited to see if he was going to do anything and nothing came. So then I wound up going to the president, Michael, and I was shaking like a leaf. It was, you know, I still can feel that, you know, like my stomach was going, I was cold and clammy and just shaking. I went in and I said to Michael, "Yeah, you need to give me a raise. I need a raise because this guy is making two dollars more an hour than I am, and we're doing the same job. I'm doing a better job. I'm doing the right job. He's taking shortcuts." And, you know, he listened to me, but, you know, he compromised. He gave me a dollar an hour raise, not quite fair, but at least there was some recognition to what I was saying. So that was...

Denise McIntosh *And you didn't back down.*

Stephanie Wilkins *I did not back down. And, you know, many years later, you know, I got my due on him.*

And then I had some clients that were really good influencers. There were two gentlemen from [Merck](#), Jim O'Brien and Dave Latta. So Dave Latta was tough as nails and he just was, you could not satisfy Dave Latta, and I'd never back down. And I did, you know, I remember there were times when I would have conflicting meetings on the Merck site, and he would call me last minute to come, and I'm like, "I'm sorry, I can't, I'm in another meeting. I'll send X, Y, Z." And every person I sent in my stead, he'd terrorize. And, you know, I stood up to him, and I found out many years later that he really admired that of me. Everybody else always would cower in his wake because, you know, he did, he caused a lot of tension. Jim O'Brien, he really mentored me in the pharmaceutical industry. He also introduced me to [ISPE](#) and, actually, to my husband. So he definitely was a big influencer in my life.

Denise McIntosh *So what would you give for advice to young women who are looking, and how do we encourage young women to choose the STEM paths?*

Stephanie Wilkins *Well, let's start with encouraging young women to choose STEM. It really has to start in early education. There are places that are doing this now, but, you know, it needs to start with young girls knowing that they can do whatever they want. There's no field that, you know, if they want to go into, that they can't. And, you know,*

there's so much hands-on learning that you could give to these young children. And they're so curious at that age, and so long as, you know, the school systems and their families nurture that curiosity, I don't think we could lose anything with that. I think we have much to gain, you know? And yeah, and of course, you know, with that, you know, we need to break down the stereotypes of what it is to be a female or a male. And you know, females don't have to pretend to be dumb because, you know, the guys won't like her because, you know, she's "too smart." And guys don't have to, you know, objectify or harass women to be cool. So, you know, I really think, you know, it needs to start really young. And if you don't quell that curiosity, women are going to gravitate to STEM naturally because it's fascinating.

Denise McIntosh *It is. It is. And not only that, it is, from a wage standpoint, can lift a lot of people out of where they came from.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Yeah. Yeah. But I will tell you that, through, you know, especially my early career, and even now, I am not fond of separating women and men's issues. I remember getting a pamphlet for a conference for women in the workplace, or women dealing with difficult people in the workplace. And I remember writing to them and saying that, "I don't know how you can address this with just women. You need to address both sides. And until you make this about dealing with difficult people in the workplace, period, don't send me any more invitations to your classes." So I really believe, you know, we have to work on it together, that women alone can't solve this.*

Denise McIntosh *No. And women alone can't close the wage gap and the skills gap.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Correct.*

Denise McIntosh *We really need to encourage all young people to look outside, maybe, where they've come from to what the possibilities are.*

Stephanie Wilkins *Right. And I think that, you know, my interactions with young people, especially, you know... Okay, I'm a little bit biased here, but I have three boys. Okay? So, you know, interesting that, in raising three boys, being this kind of a strong female figure. But they don't look at females as being less, you know, and even, you know, like just talking, you know, with my children, their friends, and their age group, there is a lot more acceptance in that generation, in the new, you know, the younger generations. And I just hope we, the older folk, don't push that away. You know, in all things they're accepting.*

I mean, I still remember I was driving my youngest, and I think he might've been maybe early teens, maybe even a tween, and they were talking about, on the radio, that Bruce Jenner was transitioning to be a woman. And my youngest is extremely curious. I mean, questions kept coming on all kinds of things. I never thought I was so dumb, we've been dealing with my youngest and his questions. But in this particular instance, he's like, I'm waiting to hear what he's going to say, because he always has something to say, and he's like, "Mom, how actually do they do that?" So not on, "Why would you do that?" Or, "What's wrong with him?" or anything. He wanted to know how you actually did it. And I think, and a lot of the young people I interact with are that way. They're accepting of people, whoever they are, whatever they are. And so that gives me great hope for the future.