

022 - Jennie Taveras transcript

Denise:

Welcome to the Art of Engineering, where we speak with some of the top women in engineering about their process principles and personal stories. I'm Denise McIntosh, CEO of Custom Powder Systems. The Containment Company today. My guest is Jennie Taveras, Director of Global Growth and Sales for [Jacobs](#) located in Jersey City.

Jennie:

My confidence is built since my first day on the job because I was involved in the whole business. You're talking about how much money are we making? What's the gross margin, what are the cost to the operations? Right?

Denise:

Jennie, welcome to The Art of Engineering.

Jennie:

Thank you, Denise. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on your channel. I'm really looking forward to ++=share our story and to chat with you today.

Denise:

Okay, well, let's just begin. I'm just always curious about people, how people get to where they are in careers. So what drew you to engineering?

Jennie:

So that's still a mystery, right? And I'm trying to answer to it. It's, it's a great question. And I think throughout just growing up, I really, you know, to say the least, I never imagined what I would be growing up and ever since I was little, I had fantasized being air stewardess. I don't know why, just find that job to be fascinating and you can look beautiful. You can wear pretty outfits and fly everywhere. So that really attracted me ever since I was little. And then I, you know, had the opportunity to come to the United States through my parents came, and I came with my mother alone to be with my family here in New York flying all the way from Shanghai, back in 1999, when I was just turned about before I turned 18.

So I was still a minor. And we, we came to the United States back in 1999. I think I know how to find bathroom with my limited English. And I was able to at least satisfy the basic functionality of human and brought my mother, you know, travel along with my mother and, and, and help taking care of her making sure that we were able to arrive safely. So, so then I started my high school year in Queens, in Francis Lewis high school. And from there, it really started that whole journey of learning and getting to understand the Western culture coming from China and grew up with that environment and, and really try to fit in. And I thought at the time it was, it was very difficult. And I really, in a way, I do recall that I specifically forced myself to involve and integrate myself into diverse to group.

Right. I think at the time I did not know that word diversity was it, it was not in my dictionary needless to say. Right? but I just felt that was necessary in order for me to learn English to develop my own circle, my own community. And I did not feel that I wanted to be amongst other Chinese students. Right? And it's not that I had anything against them and in which that created this whole turmoil, also with that teenage drama where they felt, oh, you are, anti-Asian anti Chinese and you don't, you have something against us and you, you are Americanized. And this doesn't really matter. I felt all of that were just noises. I moved on. I continue what I think is the right path to do. I joined track. I was amongst math geniuses, which I was not, but I was on the math team. And we, we went for some competition. It was just, I just really enjoyed participation. I'm the one that never good at anything. I never won gold medal, but I definitely had a lot of participation awards.

Denise:

So I'm just curious, Jennie, was one the most challenging coming from China to the United States, what was one of the most challenging besides the language?

Jennie:

Language was definitely one. And in being in New York, it's so diverse, right? Which I didn't know what that even meant. And it came from China where all your, all, you know, were the Chinese culture, the Chinese language. But being involved in, in submerge in such diverse environment where you meet with, you know, African Americans, Europeans, Indians, it was, it definitely the challenge of learning different culture and how to interact with them. And in addition to the English language itself, and you have other language, right? The Spaniards. The Indians and they all speaking their own ton accent had accents. And I think over the years, I did try what naturally just kind of gravitate towards how do I speak better? How do I have a better accent? How do I, you know, reduce the, the Chinese accent?

Right? So, I am a bit conscientious about all of that and then continue to work on them. And then in fact, when I enter the college, one of my counselors think that I grew up in Brooklyn and he thought I had a Brooklyn accent. And cuz I was, I, I would talk to him like, you know, like I used the word like a lot at the time, you know, back in college days and you, you kind of have those slang, you pick up. But yeah, and I do think cultural differences being in New York in this area was, was a very much of a shock to me besides the language.

Denise:

So you got to college and, and I mean, you picked up the language very quickly, dear, because if a professor said to you, when you started college and you hadn't even been here that long

Jennie:

Yes. So I do have a very interesting story to share there. I am very proud of that. Actually, so, so it's, it's, it's a blessing. So I, I, I do say I've been fortunate that I am able to pick up this language relatively fast and well so asking you asked me why I selected engineering. So I kind of followed suit, you know, I was in the math program in high school. And I just asked around other smart people, what you guys doing. Right. I, I had no idea. I, I know I've barely been in the country for a year and a half, so it's just really like learning and understanding what are people in general doing? So one of very smart, she scored 1600 on SAT and she said, I'm going to engineering school. I said, well, that sounds amazing.

What is that like, what do you, what do you learn from engineering school? So she kind of laid out few of the subjects. I said, okay, I wanna go to engineering school. So I applied for few engineering school Polytechnic being one of them. And when I went to an open house and I met the department head the math department head Professor Lueck, I still remember his name, Edward Lueck. Great, great mentor and really helped me tremendously through, throughout my school, my university years. So I went to see him and he was like, wait, how long have you been here? So my opening was, I would like to come to your department. I don't know what I wanna study, but I'm good in math. So that's why I'm here and to get to know about this department a little bit.

And he was just so amazed and he showed me around like a subject and he took me around the math department and said, hear her speak, come and listen to isn't she amazing? And she wants to come here. And I till this day, which obviously it's been moon moons ago. I still remember that day, like it was yesterday. It was, it was a great joy. It was a great experience just to feel that how I was so very honored that someone recognized this as a talent, as a value in me. And then I thought, wow, this is amazing. Right.

Denise:

And welcomed

Jennie:

Yes, absolutely. And he said, why you wanna study math? I said, I don't know. I'm just good at it. And he said, no, you, you wanna study chemical engineer? I said, okay, I wanna study chemical engineer.

And he said, they've given out a lot of money, a lot of scholarship. I said, okay. So right now I don't have a lot of scholarship from the university. I didn't score well in SAT and well enough to get admitted to the school, but not well enough to get a full scholarship, a full ride. So he really then suggested to me, say, go study chemical engineering, they have program, they have funding. They will help you. And he took me the same day to meet with the Professor Milovich and again, another great mentor of mine. He met with me and he said, I will see what I can do for you. So combining both the school scholarship and the department's financial support I was able to put pretty substantial amount of financial aid to go to school.

So I did end up selecting Polytech University located in Metrotech, Brooklyn, and I still have to come out of pocket few about \$4,000 and cover the books and all that. So it was very difficult at that time. My parents separated. So I was living with my mother and being in the country just shy of three years, just a little over two. It was a very difficult, that was really hard time for my mother, given that she didn't speak any of the language. Right? She had to support me herself and try to send me to school. And I luckily I didn't let her down. I was not a you know, had a pretty strong drive in me and made it to the Dean's list. So that's where the story gets interesting. So I made it to the Dean's list.

I went to talk with him, I made appointment to speak to him. I basically said see, you didn't gimme a full scholarship because I did not score well in SAT from my understanding this how system works right? Now, I don't think that's fair because I was only in the country for a very short time. And English, wasn't my first language. So I couldn't possibly do well. Now I've proven to you that I made it to your, so I is on the, you know, I think you, if, if the school can't help me any further, unfortunately I will not be able to return next semester because my mother is a single mom and we just can't afford this. And he was very impressed and that's the person who told me that I have a Brooklyn accent and he said, very great negotiation skill. And let me see what I can do. So from that year on I got full ride through my university.

Denise:

Wow.

Jennie:

So I, I think I, again, just you know, it was very difficult. I know my still brings tears to my mother when she thinks about this. And and so, so that's my story of selecting engineering. It was all very financial based. It was not scientific at all. But now I do love engineering. So I'm, I'm very fortunate that although the choice of this path was a bit ups and down, it's sort of a, sort of a coincidental and, but I'm glad that I picked this path and, and it really led to where I am today. So hopefully that answered that question.

Denise:

Oh my gosh. And, and those, all of those people, you mentioned have to be so very proud of you. And, and you subscribed early to my theory of "don't ask, don't get," which probably has brought you to the position you have today. But share with us the journey from college to where you are today.

Jennie:

So I think that's absolutely true. Don't ask, don't get, right? So in life I have learned, and then it, it's, it's a fine art, right. And it's about how you ask. And I've also throughout my career learned is that you can ask, but you also have to have evidence to support what you asking for. And so I, I do, I do kind of carry all of these lessons I learned from, so, so one thing I will say is that I've been very fortunate. I have great mentors throughout just my entire life ever since I came to this country. Right. and, and that's why America's great. I do love this country. I think it's really provided me with so much opportunity. I myself live through and then just the joy that, and that they experience all the lessons I learned.

It's, it's tremendous. And then it's not enough words can describe how I feel like, you know, my blood is flowing right now.

Denise:

Well, I just happen to think we're very fortunate. You came here.

Jennie:

Thank you. Thank you. I would agree. I'm just kidding. And I, I do think my success does attribute highly to people that around me, right? The, the, the circle I formed the network I formed. My, my professors, I mentioned, I still remember a lot of their names because they played a very important role and, and shaped who I am today and throughout my career, you know Chris Stanley at Pall cooperation, who, you

know, taught me so many, you know, I being a very young female engineer in, in the industry. A funny, funny, there is a question you have asked earlier about just being female and how, how do you fit?

How do you feel that you fit in the industry? I never felt being a female was a given me any disadvantage. I, I, I don't know how to describe. I, I feel that it actually is a advantage. The fact that I am a female because I bring a different energy into the room. Right. I bring different, not, no forget about ideas. Everyone has different ideas that, that has nothing to do with sex. But I do think that we bring different energy and that's so important when it, when it have a room that you are trying to meet and it, and be productive and have these discussions, having these different type of energy. And I do feel being a male and a female. It's very evident that they're very different high, low left. Right, right? So I recognize my strength and being a female and how it fits in the male dominated world of engineering. And, and I really use it to my advantage. I benefit from it. So I, myself did not have not felt that this is a disadvantage at all ever. So I work hard and just like a male colleague would I will make fun of a male colleague, just like a male colleague will make fun of a female. So it's all equal grounds. Right? And it did shape me in that first job where I used to get I'm still very emotional person that I had a difficult time take criticism. I strive for perfection and I work so hard to reach there. And if it's not there, it, it kind of beats me up a little inside. So I'm, I'm my biggest critic. Right. So I'm hard on myself. And, and then it beats me down and I get emotional.

I feel I failed. And, oh my goodness. I, I used to get into the, my manager's office and he'll give me the performance review. I felt I just did above and beyond. And I did so well. And if it's not a good score, I would tear, I would tear up and I learned not to cry. So that was not my first job taught me not to cry. You don't cry in front of anybody. I still fail at it at times, but that was a very valuable lesson for my first job.

Denise:

What was your first job?

Jennie:

I was a process engineer for Pall Cooperation. Okay. And I, I went from engineer one to engineer to I developed their micro membranes for Pall. And I left them cuz they, they gave me high ratings and didn't wanna promote me high enough.

And I said, well, time to move on. To bigger and greater things. So I joined Unilever right after I left Paul and at [Unilever](#) I spent about five years was it was a great opportunity there because Unilever is a company that does great at buying and selling. They're so good at it. They take a brand, they purchase them and they package and look beautiful, look, nice, have good revenue. And then they sell them off and they profit from it. And they, I learned that from learned that business from them not only that I did, they do their career path kind of swims laterally, and then kind of swim upward. I really gotten a lot of experience from R and D, supply chain, the whole end to end, and then even within supply chain category engineer.

So that's when I got exposed to Capital Project Management I was exposed to planning and I was also exposed to product management. So, so they kind of unofficially, I was on that sort of a hypo program right. Where you got to different functions within the organization you learn. And that was,

Denise:

You got a lot of exposure in a lot of areas

Jennie:

And it's, it just, it just gives you the whole picture. Right? You now you see the big picture, what do everybody do and how does it all contribute all the way up to the top? Right. So I really enjoyed that experience. And unfortunately I had to move to west coast because my husband's job had relocated us. So we, we had left and that's when I joined the contract engineering field industry. So I joined Advent (Engineering Services) first.

They were a very small process focused engineering consulting firm. And they did a lot of staffing providing project manager, process engineer that type of capability services to the client. But they're very focused in life science and they do have some nuclear business, but most of their revenue come from life science. So from that job, you know, like I said, I, I'm a big participation personality, you know, it's not all about, I mean, what are you paying me to do what, right? It's about, Hey, you giving me a salary. Can I do X, Y, Z, and ABC? Right. So I was very enthusiastic in integrating into the company to help out. I will volunteer. It's not about, Hey, what's the project code? Where can I charge to? So they felt the energy. They recognize how I can bring value to the company. And I was, I slowly moved my way up in that organization because small company, we all know they want that. They want you to say, Hey, this person's willing to work extra for free. Why not?

Denise:

Wear, wear different hats? And, and yes, those are great talents.

Jennie:

And they're really hard to find. Now I learn now I'm all the way up here. So through them and again, building mentorship, right? Meaning that I, I gravitate towards people and then I think people, you know, I'm quite magnetic and the people do come and, and feel comfort having me around because my energy because I'm the doers and everything is so optimistic. Right. It's just, it's a good place to be. So, so I got a lot of help there to elevate my career through, with that company. So I did some Operations Management towards the end of that career before the VP had kind of unfortunately he was pursuing for a CEO position that fell through. So he had left the company. But that opened opportunity for Helga during that time. That's where I, where I met.

Denise:

OK. I was just about to ask where you and Helga Salling, got to cross paths first.

Jennie:

Yes. she is amazing. She is again, another mentor in my life where every single person that I have in my circle, I don't say I want to use them, but they all serve a very specific purpose. Right? And I think Helga so strong in networking and she's amazing at this. And then that's why you and I met, right? And then without her talent we, would've not sat and had this conversation here today. Which all thanks to her. So, so her and I crossed path at Advent and that's when we started talking. I think she, I hope she recognized me as a talent and, and we really stayed in touch throughout sort of the remainder throughout our career. Now I joined her, followed her again at Jacob's. But in between we, I did follow her again to DPS, which since the VP at Advent and had left and and, and she said, "Hey, you wanna join with, join me to work at DPS."

So we went from a hundred people company and joined DPS being about two, 2000-3000 people globally. So that's a scale up, right? So I said, "Absolutely. Let's, let's go". And with DPS, I also had a opportunity to grow my confidence because the company was relatively small. We're building the whole New Jersey office. I worked for Michael who was the VP of that office who set the office up and did quite of a groundwork and, and building the team together. So I had a, I was fortunate enough to join him and that job really because of how small we were. And I got involved in the whole business, meaning that I wore all the hats. I did proposal writing. I bid on jobs and I win jobs. And then I, I work on those jobs, so I sell them and I do them. So that's that, that, that became challenging towards the end. But it was, it it's nothing I will ever trade that kind of experience for right. And I'm not, I'm not a, a lazy person that doesn't wanna do it. So I'm the participation person, right. So it's all about doing.

Denise:

Well, and having done all of those things, you can appreciate what it takes to accomplish that.

Jennie:

Absolutely. and then build the confidence. Cause I know how these are, these things are done. Right. And now I can confidently speak about them. I can stand in front. And that's another thing my confidence is built since my first day on the job to today. Right. And then in different stage of my career, I felt how great and what magnitude they grow as well. You know, of my last job, it's, it has just grown tremendously because you, I was involved in the whole business, the line of business, you're talking about how much money are we making? What's the gross margin? What are the cost to the operations? Right. It, it was a, it was a different, different ballgame. I'm I was no longer individual contributor. I was part of the business owner. Right. so that even though I didn't make the business owner kind of money, but, that's okay. These things will hopefully follow one day. And so when,

Denise:

Which brings us to today, so what does your, what does this opportunity look like?

Jennie:

So when I started talking with Helga about joining Jacob's, I really see Jacob's potential as being that big network. Right. Not only within Jacob. So remember, I I'm a huge about network, right. So I recognize that just so how much value we add throughout my career. So I wanna continue to expand that and network it's to me, it's not just, I know Denise, right? It's more about how well do I know Denise? Everyone knows someone now with the technology, you, someone has a million connect contacts on LinkedIn. And I ran into some guy doing one of the event and he says, I am a friend with, so, and so's

someone who's super famous, but to me at the time I was quite impressed. I was like, wow. But everyone has, can connect to we're all off by one degree, right?

With the whole LinkedIn technology, what they taught us is the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, right. We're just so much closer. And then the one, the moment you can link up to one and you are now the second to 500 other people. Right. So, but it means absolutely nothing. So what I'm going with this, where I'm going with this is that Jacob is that big organization that not only has 50,000 employees, not that I will know all 50,000 but also brings the client contacts, the work we do for them. And I think that's just a great, huge opportunity as my next stepping stone, where I go from DPS, where, which they are 3000 employees globally. Now I'm going to the next level of 50,000 globally. Right. so I felt that is from a career path standpoint, and that's just the right move. Helga's great. She's, you know, she's, you know, she, she looks after me. So that's always good to have that friend in, in the industry that, that really truly look out for your best interest. Right. So I think very fortunate.

Denise:

What does a day in your life look like these days?

Jennie:

I have meetings almost all day. I think part of it, we were, we've been kind of discussing, is that because of COVID? Is that just because my line of work? So it's a bit of a blur at the moment I haven't fully figured out, is it because of COVID? Is it because of my line of work? But I do think take COVID out of the picture given I'm in the Sales Industry, it, it does require constant engagement. And just talking with people, pinging them, you know, every little discussion and conversation counts, right? It's about, it's about not forgetting. It's not that you are not like, I'm not forgetting it's about not letting them forget about you. Right. And sometimes you just ping them say, Hey, just saw something and thought of you. And, and, and I love building, I love my job.

Part of why I love it is I'm able to build these network, build these relationship, but I really build it with meaning right. Where I work with these clients. And some I'm not gonna lie. Some are gonna be a bit more distant than others, but I do my best to really truly be not only their supplier, but really someone who can talk to them about anything and be their friends. Right. And, and, and maybe they don't see me that way, but I certainly wholeheartedly put it out there and to love them. I mean, I don't wanna sound creepy, but in a way yes. And I, I love all the people I have in my network.

Denise:

Well, and to be that trusted source of information, whether it's something you provide or something you could help them find, otherwise that, you know, that's something that I've always relied on. I may not be able to provide what you're looking for, but I may know somebody who does

Jennie:

That's, isn't that all is this whole network is of all about yes. Right? Yeah. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful circle.

Denise:

Yes.

Jennie:

So, yeah. So my day involves with a lot of talking to people. I do find it challenging to balance between my work and my family. I do have two beautiful daughters. They're full of energy, just like I do. I, I get so much joy hanging out with them and, and we do play a lot and laugh and, and, and it just really learn how to cry when you cry. I cry the hardest, I, I am not shy away from crying. I am a big cry baby. I cry in every sad movies. And then my five year old always look at me and then she goes,

"Mommy, that's not real." I was like, mind your own business. Okay. And I will sit there and stop and just let my emotion out and I love it. It's okay. My kids all make fun of me and they, I cry. Literally every sad scene, someone dies. Someone loves someone sad. I'm, I'm always crying with them. And then when I'm happy, I'm just enjoy. I'm just silly, like ex not shy away from being that acting silly, acting, not very intelligent. And while I am very intelligent and I'm okay with that, because I just think when you live, you just live through the, the fullest to very element, every emotion you feel, you should feel the fullest

Denise:

Well, it's why you are so appealing to others.

Jennie:

<Laugh>

Denise:

Is cause you share all of that.

Jennie:

Yes. Yes, absolutely. And I, I, I do want to be influential to others. Right. Cause I, I, I always feel that what I am so bad at terms and phrases, right. So I'm gonna not say the phrase cause I'm going to butcher, but a meaning of that phrase is that you receive some, you give some back, right. What, what, what is the correct phrase for that?

Denise:

Well, the give and take is one of the easiest ones.

Jennie:

Yep. And so, so I, I continue to be that mentor for others to the best of my ability. And, and I am given, I want to help everyone to succeed, to see them succeed.

Denise:

Well, I have to hearken back to our very first conversation this week, Jennie, because of the coincidence of you receiving an email from me and having a client that perhaps needs some containment for powders, which is what we do.

Jennie:

Yes.

Denise:

So our connections are, are so important on both sides.

Jennie:

Mm-Hmm, absolutely. So we should talk about that. Speaking of that, I need to follow up with them to see where that requests are coming in. Because they were supposed to come in this week. Yeah. It's coming to an end, but no, it's, we, I think we work in a very small industry. If anyone in this industry can meaningfully help each other. And, and we should yes, there is so much in the industry and I think being selfish and siloed and closing is no longer works. The world is hungry for resources and we all know that. And as of today, the supply chain crisis, the inflation. Right. So, so we should work together to solve all these problems rather than say, this is mine and you find your own. No, it, it, I don't think we will succeed in this, in this society today, having that mindset.

Denise:

Yes. We need to expand the resource base.

Jennie:

Yeah. We're hungry for that for sure. Everyone is, everyone is.

Denise:

Well before we, before we sign off, did you have a chance to think about the rapid-fire questions? I can probably imagine what brings you joy, but what brings you joy, Jennie?

Jennie:

That's also a very good question. And, and I think there are some definitely very deep philosophical path. We can go down, talk about happiness. Right. And I still ask that question and people always, are you happy? So I don't know. Right. I, I don't feel unhappy. Right. So, so, but we won't have a full day. We can certainly set up the full workshop to talk about that. But just, just within the five minute, I do think that joy, I do love spending time with my family, with my friends. Even having a conversation with you, it brings me joy able to share their story with you. It brings me joy. And talking to my my clients and able to just be myself and express the whole still being smart and serious are very hard. That's what I learned. So yeah. So life is hard enough and I live my life through silliness, but when, when I need to be sharp and serious, I think I am one of the sharpest tool in the toolbox. So that's not I don't shy away from that. But things do you know, the nature travel just be able to find time for myself sneak away few minutes to work out all of these little things, bring me joy.

Denise:

So what's your morning ritual?

Jennie:

Morning ritual. That's a very good question. I have a hard time getting up in the morning sometimes <laugh> but I think morning, it just think about my day. Right? So, so a lot of times I, I take the morning time to start thinking about, all right, what do I, what do I get? How do I fulfill my day? You know, when do I carve out time to do X, Y, Z? I like to be busy. I like to, I do not like to stay still. So, my morning, usually majority of the push big portion of that morning time is besides getting coffee is to plan my day out.

Denise:

That's me, too. Coffee and then plan the day. And then's right. Anybody you'd like to be stuck on an elevator with?

Jennie:

Ooh, Ooh. I want to be stuck in the elevator with Chris Hemsworth and I can tell you why. He's a very funny person. I love, I like funny people. I like comedy. That's one of my biggest enjoy in my life. I like to watch comedy movies. I, myself jokingly, or will often say "If I, if this engineering gig doesn't work out, I'll quit and be a comedian." Hey, just take some little training. I have a lot of material. I write down, know some of them may get two or three cackles, but hey, takes time to work on it. So I have not given that dream up yet. So comedian so yes, Chris Hemsworth, besides the look, the muscle, the height, oh, I love all his movies. So I would love to be stuck in the elevator with him. I think a lot of other women will agree.

Denise:

I think so. Jennie, thank you so much for joining me today. This has absolutely been delightful and we'll circle back on that client need.

Jennie:

Yes, let's do that. And I will follow up with them and next week we should have a follow up call once I hear from them.

Denise:

Very good. Thank you so much.