

025 - Art of Engineering - The Women of CPS

Denise:

Welcome to the Art of Engineering, where we speak with some of the top women in engineering and manufacturing about their process, procedures, and personal stories. I'm Denise McIntosh, CEO of Custom Powder Systems, The Containment Company. Today I have the honor of talking with the women of Custom Powder Systems. We'll meet Kimberly Wallace, our parts manager, Mary Garton, the front face of our company for many years. Laura Irwin, who recently joined us from another company and works in our purchasing department. Lacey Rager, our star welder on the floor, who is holding her own in a position historically held by men. And De Ann Kraichely, our HR director. She and I have been working together since we started on folding tables and chairs in 2005 when we actually started the company. I'll start with Kimberly, our parts manager. Kimberly, how did you get into manufacturing and who or what got you here?

Kimberly:

I took a job about 20 years ago with a stainless steel fabricator. And it was just a office assistant job at the time, but it was mainly comprised of a lot of men. I think there was one other woman in my department about 10 years after that. I was getting bored, but I liked, I liked the business, I liked the fast pace of it. I liked working with the men the women, all of it. I had asked to do something a little bit more challenging, and so about 10 years ago is when they brought me into sales. So I've been in sales with manufacturing for a little bit over 10 years now. And I love it. I love everything about it. I'm big on customer service, so that's the biggest tool that I love about my job is the customer service.

I like the contact with the customers. And then I also like working with everyone here at custom Powder Systems as well. So that's how I got into the manufacturing business.

Denise:

Thank you. Mary Darton.

Mary:

Well, I got into the manufacturing business because the day I parted ways with my former employer, I was late to an optimistic meeting, and my current boss, when I said what happened, she said, "well, come to work for me." And I said, "I don't know if I wanna do that." Finally, six months later, I said, "okay, I'll do it." And I like it. I like the,

the, I like talking to the customers and I like meeting them when they come in the door, so,

Denise:

and people remember you, Mary

Mary:

That's good. I guess

Denise:

Thank you. Laura.

Laura:

Okay. Well, I have a background in hospitality hotel, restaurant administration, and those are some long,

long hours inconsistent days off. And I had an opportunity from a friend I was at a point where I was just exhausted in my life, and she said, why don't you come work and try this job out? And I applied, interviewed, and I did get the job. And so I started in a print room full-time in a manufacturing facility and worked for the director of engineering at the time. And just continuously worked my way up with that company for about 17 years. Did print room, engineering, administration, planning, and then purchasing. And that's where I am today. Here with your company.

Denise:

Our company.

Laura:

Thank you. I'm still learning

De Ann:

Never could say "our" in the, in the past, could we?

Laura:

No.

Denise:

So, and, and our female welder: Lacey.

Lacey:

Oh, geez. I, I don't know. I played competitive soccer in high school and I had some scholarships and I wasn't about it. I was wore out and I went to [OTC](#) right outta school, and I was in agriculture programs and I couldn't get through 'em. I was bored with it. I wasn't going to class. It was one of those where my mom said, you have to pick something or you're getting kicked out of the house. So I went to OTC. They have like one of those spiral things you spin, and I literally spun it and stopped it, and there was a welding brochure. And so I took a welding course. But I went through all the courses at OTC and it, I just went on with it from there. I liked it. So

Denise:

So how did you find us?

Lacey:

Well, I worked for a company that a lot of the people I worked with had come over here, and they had honestly blown me up for like two years to come over here. And I was like, I'm not ready. I'm not ready. And then I was ready and I came over here pretty quick after I realized where I was at was and where I wanted to be.

Denise:

Very good.

De Ann:

And you love every minute?

Lacey:

Heck yeah.

Denise:

So De Ann,

De Ann:

I worked in the beer industry, safe business. I could have worked there my whole life, but I didn't have the challenge. And then kept running into Bob Luebbe. He was always at every function. We sponsored And he called me a couple of times, made some banners and stuff, and we, we just chatted one time at one of the, the functions we were at. And, and it was a family owned business. And the kids came back from college and I was not challenged. And so I wanted something challenging, I had lunch with Bob and Denise and low behold. Did I get a challenge? And yeah. You know, that first few years starting a business was scary, wasn't it?

Denise:

It was.

De Ann:

It's, and then it's just kind of grown and progressed into that and got to meet all these wonderful women we brought into the company.

Denise:

Yeah. Good.

De Ann:

It's been exciting. Never boring. Never without a challenge, right?

Denise:

Right. So part of the reason for having this conversation is hopefully to encourage other women and minorities to join manufacturing and to understand what the jobs are and what the opportunities are. So I would like for us to talk about what a typical day looks like. So Kimberly...

Kimberly:

There's no day that's the same in manufacturing because everything's different every day. Some days are quiet. Not very many, but some are. But a typical, let's just, I'm just gonna go off today. Today has been a crazy day for all of us in here, I think we've got all kinds of stuff going on, but a lot of customer emails. A lot of I've done today a lot of invoicing. I do all the invoicing for Custom Powder. And I've in invoiced a lot today.

I have touched base with some past due accounts today touched on those. I've done some correspondence with our salesman getting ready to enter a large order we just received from a very good customer. So we're prepping that, getting ready to get that on

the books on the next day or so. Working with purchasing today on some, some issues that we've had. And I, what I wanna really highlight is how much the departments work together. I mean, I touch base with purchasing at least every day about something HR I touch base with every day about something. I, I engineering, I talk with every day. I have correspondence with other departments every day. And I really, really like that about Custom Powder that we have the ability and that everyone is you know, willing to help each other out. Whenever you have an issue, you can go in and ask for help or ask for assistance on what you're working on.

So I know that I don't know about you other ladies, but I come to work and the next thing I know it's noon and the next thing I know it's five o'clock and mean it goes by so quickly just because there's just a constant all day long something going on. So that's a day in my shoes.

Denise:

So Mary?

Mary:

Well, the first thing I do is make sure the conference rooms are kinda straight. Make sure the coffee cups in the main conference room are all washed, and clean, because sometimes they're not.

Denise:

We appreciate that.

Mary:

And, you know, I answer the phones, I let people in the door, I answer the phones, and most, a lot of the people know who they want to talk to when they call. A lot of people don't have any idea who they need to talk to. They think they do, but no, that's not it at all. I post, I match the packing slips to the invoices and enter the invoices and hopefully the invoices match what purchasing put in for the quantity in the mail, because it doesn't always happen that way, does it?

Denise:

You're the best call screener.

Mary:

I, I do screen the calls. We get a lot of trashy calls and magazine sales, magazine sales, all sort, all sorts of calls anymore. It used to be the magazine sales have really slowed down because you told 'em not to call because I get nasty, but, and some people that continue to call back, once I answer, they hang up so well.

Denise:

And Mary, you're also our connector for, she is the one who shares birthday wishes for everybody into company.

Mary:

So we get to start the day with who I, whose birthday is, and I try to make sure I know who all's in meetings throughout the day so I know when they can and can't get a call.

Denise:

Thank you.

Mary:

You're welcome.

De Ann:

That is a big load off of everybody else's shoulders when they're trying to juggle many things.

Denise:

So, Laura do you have a typical day?

Laura:

Typical day and then purchase thing? I mean, it kind of goes along with, same with Kimberly, is that we've worked with all departments. I mean, I could be working with sales, I could be working with engineering, project management, the floor. And, and when I say the floor, it could be any of the guys on the floor. It could be receiving shipping. There's just a wide range that you go through. You work with sales orders from basically start to finish and interact at some point in between. So you really have to know the whole system and learn the whole system on how the company works. But that makes it exciting as well because it makes it never a dull moment. It also changes up the pace.

There's work orders that you need to learn drawings printing drawings documentation. There's a lot of things that are involved with manufacturing in the office that, that we have to do to support the shop. Otherwise the shop wouldn't run, run. I mean that they need our support. So that, that's kind of a typical day. A lot of POs, a lot of interaction even with vendors. A lot of paperwork, a lot of correspondence pricing. We always checking to make sure we got the right price. That goes against the estimate on what sales sold. Might have to fix copy machine or two.

Sorry, Lacey. I can't do a welder. <Laugh>.

Lacey:

Yeah, I can't, that's ok. I'll do the welder. You can do the copier. So I dunno how to do that.

Denise:

Lacey, what are you working on these days?

Lacey:

I don't really ever have a typical day. I have run a lot come in, I sit, I have my own little area and I get myself set up and welder and whatever job we're on and I start on it. But I am in, I do a lot of fixes for the grinder for other people. I've been there a lot doing repairs, like after they grind, if they find holes and stuff, you know, patchwork. That sounds bad. Patchwork. Yeah, It's pickup. Yeah. But I jump a lot.

Denise:

So anything you're working on in particular?

Lacey:

Well I'm in a new area right now and I don't know what it's called that I'm working on, but I'm welding these little boxes together inside and out and that's my favorite. If I can keep my hood down all day, I'm happy. I don't have to get outta my area. Don't have to. So you guys are the customer service people. And I like to be in my little bubble. I'm under my hood where I don't have to really be, talk to a lot of people

Denise:

That's why we like having you here and you keep your head down.

De Ann

So, Lacey, you moved pretty quick though. I mean, you come to work as a welder for us on the bin line. You quickly moved up where you were mentoring and supervising and the lead on the bin line, and then we came to you and said, "Hey, there's another job you need to learn if you're gonna progress on up." So we moved you over to the equipment line, which is one of our toughest welding lines, right?

Lacey:

Yep.

De Ann:

Yeah. So you've been moving pretty quick, even though you've been a welder for a long time.

Lacey:

Yeah, it's all, it's definitely new. I've, I've done, I've done the like factory work. I've done the pipeline, I've done the oil rigs, I've done the high pressure vessel tanks. Like I just, I like learning all of it. I feel like if you only learn part of it, you're not gonna succeed in the industry because then you only know one thing.

De Ann:

But, but we heard a lot of interesting stories. Kimberly and I went out and visited with Lacey over the weekend. Holy. We did. We did. And visited her house, met her dad, and as a, because when people don't expect a woman to be a welder, right?

Lacey

No, they don't. I've got a lot of weird looks.

De Ann:

So you went to to the gas station the time.

Lacey:

Yeah, I was

De Ann:

You were walking out of the gas station and, and because you were all gritty and dirty and stuff, what happened?

Lacey:

Well I was working in a carbon tank shop. The job I was at, we got slow, so they transferred us to their sister company. And carbon's just a dirtier job and the shop isn't as clean. I wore bibs that had holes. Like I wasn't gonna ruin my nice clothes, so I duct taped them so I didn't catch on fire. Cause I'm a stickler, you know. So I'm, I'm not gonna buy new clothes for this to ruin them. And me and my buddy ran up to the gas station on lunch and apparently I did not look like I lived in a home. And this dude gave me his food when we left the gas station and was like, "I hope this helps." And I'm like, okay, I know that I'm hungry all the time, but you don't know that. And he thought I was homeless. And he was like, "oh my gosh, you're not homeless, are you?" And I was like, "no, that's my dually right there." And he felt really bad and he gave me his food and I never saw him again. I had some really weird incidents, don't get me wrong, I didn't look up to par. I looked a little rough, but I didn't think I looked that rough.

De Ann

She tells quite a few funny stories about being in a not typical job and, and what happens to her

Lacey:

Yeah. Yeah. I, I've done it for 10 years. So I have I have some funny stories.

Denise:

So De Ann, as the a director of HR, do you ever have a typical day?

De Ann:

No, never. Never. And, and I walk in and I go, oh Lord, look at my desk. Occasionally I get to clinging it off, but then I remind myself, you know, Albert Einstein had a dirty desk too, so I feel like I'm in good company. It's a sign of intelligence. So I, I think I'm very smart. Some days I come in and I sit down and the door immediately somebody starts knocking on my door eating something or wanting something. Now orientation couple of times a week or different employees, we're always trying to think outside the box and I'm always dragging somebody into it.

Lately it was Kimberly so that we can plan stuff and, and reward our employees, like the movie night coming up. Where we're all gonna just sit outside and watch hocus pocus

wear our witches hats and eat a hot dog or a hamburger. But no, there is something like everybody else here, different every day.

Denise:

So the pandemic has, and, and the need for fighting people has created an even bigger need to recruit. So the last question I'd like like to ask is for ideas around the table, about how can we spread the word for opportunities that are in manufacturing to other women in our community to help raise the, the level of living Like Lacey, how could we find more of you?

Lacey:

I thought a lot about this question. I, I don't have a lot of girlfriends, but the ones I do have, they don't, the side I'm in, they don't like the dirty, the long hours. The work really hard to where you go home and you sit down and fall asleep on the couch. But I have, I do have a couple friends who are in it. It's just really hard to find women that want that side.

De Ann:

You know, though, I think though, when I go to OTC

Lacey:

I see more and more every year over the years.

De Ann I see more women now over there in welding classes than I did before.

Lacey:

I think the biggest thing is it's just not vocalized. Like you go somewhere and they're like, you're a welder. How? And they're like, did you not know you could go to like, you like go to school? Yeah. You realize not, not a lot of people know there's like a welding school if they've not grown up like that, you know? Where we grew up knowing like, oh, well so-and-so's Dad's a welder, so-and-so Aunt's a welder. Like, you don't hear that. So I don't think people really realize that. But your dad was a police officer. Yeah, I know. I don't know how I ended up where I'm at

Denise:

But you spun the wheel.

Lacey:

Yeah, I do get, like, I made, it sounds lame, but I've made some like TikToks of my welding stuff and Instagram and stuff and I have got a lot of females over the past to just the last couple years that have messaged me asking on advice to how to get in the field. And I'll gladly, like I, I'm not on those things a lot, but I'll get on there every once in a while to make sure, cuz I get random messages and stuff for people.

Denise:

Great idea. Laura?

Laura:

Well, I'll just say those that are out there that are, you know, I wanna say fast food. I mean the hours, the restaurant business, the hotels, I mean, I know everybody's looking for work, but sometimes those schedules aren't accommodating. And so here we have a Monday through Friday opportunities. Right now we're what, Monday through Friday we're off at 11:30. But we know that that could change at, at any time with scope of work.

De Ann:

Well I think it'd be a revolt

Laura:

with the current employees think it would pick their backlog and say differently <laugh> thank goodness for backlog. Yes. Which having that healthy backlog...

Denise:

So what you're saying is the opportunity here is a stable structured timeframe. Timeframe that you can plan a life around.

Larua:

Right. It's very consistent. There's paid holidays great benefits package, 401k, health insurance with vision.

De Ann

You're doing my job now?

Laura:

I mean I coming in here, what, 90 days I mean that was one of my, yes, it was my, that was, that was something very big on my, my plate in the state of our economy right now was, was health insurance.

Lacey:

I agree with that schedule because where I come from, I could get sent on the road, so having a set schedule's nice because I'm tired traveling.

Denise:

So Mary or Kimberly

Mary:

I think that how to share opportunities, I don't know that I have a great fantastic idea for that. I know that with you saying you do the TikToks and stuff, I know on my Facebook, a lot of times I have where I work on my Facebook, but sometimes I'll get asked that on Facebook or do you work ...And the one thing, whenever I tell people where I work or why ended up in the stainless steel industry for 20 years a lot of times I'll ask why, what's kept you in that?

And I agree with Laura on the stability of a, you know, structured schedule for the most part and the benefit package and all of that. That's great. But I also feel like it's a very rewarding career as far as income. They're very rewarding careers. I mean I feel like where we're at now at Custom Powder, I feel like you take very good care of your employees. I think that it's very rewarding to have the pa the benefit package that we have and how hard De Ann works every year to keep our insurance rates lower than what they would be if she didn't put in the extra time that she puts to look for those lower packages for us.

So I think it's all in just kind of like what Laura said, all in a big bucket. There's so many things you could drop down in there to say this is why I, I've stayed in the career path I have for 20 years, but I think it's the reward of all the goody things that we get with it, you know? And I like the work I do. So that's a big part of it. But I would definitely, I'm on with Laura on, on benefits and,

Denise:

and I just wanna to say even though Lacey is a welder, she's clean as a whistle today, she, I just wanna say

Lacey:

I didn't have to get in a tank today.

Denise:

That's our, our manufacturing facility. Even though we build lots of bins and big equipment, it's a clean

Lacey:

Air Conditioning is a huge plus because

De Ann:

How do you compare it to other places?

Lacey:

I've worked in some very dirty shops, like my first welding job, it made me not want to weld. Like, I literally called my welding instructor and I told him I was gonna go be a nanny because I was, I hated it. I literally would leave looking black like it was dirtiest job I ever had. And he got me in on my first fab job. But the climate controlled and how clean it is makes a world of difference because I, I, as long as I've done this, I hate being dirty it drives me nuts.

De Ann

So air conditioning, heating?

Lacey:

I love the air conditioning. The heat is awesome, but I'm really, I don't like the summertime. I know I'm a weird one, but the area, the climate control in the summertime is a 1000% plus for me. <Laugh>

De Ann:

It's been really hot this year.

Lacey:

I've worked in shops where inside takes it's 200 plus degrees and it just makes you hate every bit of being there. It makes you not wanna do it anymore. So this is great.

Denise:

So De Ann, how can we find more of these women?

De Ann

I, I go to OTC as you know, probably about three or four times a year.

Denise:

And OTC is Ozarks Technical College.

De Ann

Yes. Right

Denise:

Here in Springfield, Missouri.

De Ann:

I am spending manufacturing day there this year all morning long talking to more welding, drafting students. It's a, a great resource for any company in this business to, to get to know the welding instructors and students and what they have to offer to our community. It's a good, good technical school and they built that advanced manufacturing. So that's gonna be awesome for our community, also. We might just have to drag Lacey for this year when I go over. So as a real welder, she can relate to some of the student stuff. I think just, you know, as, as women we have to be supportive of each other.

Lacey:

I think seeing other women would help, like you said, cuz I know I didn't see any women when I was at OTC. It was me and a couple other girls and it was, I think it was four of us and two of us made it to the end. The other two dropped out. But anybody they brought in, that was all men.

De Ann:

Yes. And that those opportunities to think outside the box for your career because it's, it's afforded you in your career a a great opportunity to, you know, your house, your land, your horses, your ...And, and anybody else in this room. What, what it's done for you. It's not always easy starting at the bottom as women working with all men. Right. We all know that. And they can be moodier than all of us in this room put together Right?

Lacey:

1000%

De Ann

Dealing with that. And a lot of my job, you know, is coaching even the executive level helping them through their thought processes sometimes. And I do that almost daily, don't I? I do that. Not, please don't take this personally or you know, this is what's going on. So I know it's coming across kind of harshly. Even even all the way up to the CEO and

Denise:

Yes, thank you.

De Ann:

and I, you know what, that we went to Radical Leadership right? When Yes. We first started here and that was a big plus. And I think another big plus for me was working for the Victim Center. So I learned to be empathetic. Maybe not sympathetic, but empathetic. Right. It's more important to be empathetic than sympathetic sometimes. So those are, are, I think it's just important to keep building on what we have as a team and keep pushing forward.

Denise:

And coming up we were awarded money from the state to continue training programs. Yes. So we offer training on the job. So anything else anybody would like to add?

De Ann:

I'm just happy that I heard right here in this room that all the hard work I did, building that benefit insured health insurance program and benefit package.

Kimberly:

Lacey:

I know when I was on the road I was paying \$500 a month for insurance. So

De Ann

Was that all kinds of insurance or just health?

Lacey:

Just health. Yeah.

De Ann:

I don't think people realize how expensive benefit and packages are anymore and, and I, I don't know, but the younger people's never had to deal with it before. It's really a sticker shock to them. You know they don't understand the different types of plans.

Kimberly

You know, I can say when, when before I came on board here and you reached out to me, De Ann reached out to me and I think she, you emailed me and I had just left a stainless steel fabricator here in town and I was worried, remember how worried I was. I emailed her back and I said, I don't think I can come to work for you there because I don't think a can cuz of a non-compete and that I had signed. And, and she emailed me right back and I wasn't even gonna come in and interview. I was afraid I couldn't. And she emailed me right back and said, no, no, you know, don't let that stop you come on in and interview. It's completely different type of business type of business, you know, come on in and interview.

I did and I think I had three interviews before I finally got offered the job and then I was so excited. I was excited for a couple of reasons. One, I was excited to still be in stainless steel because I really enjoyed it when I did it prior. And I was excited for a challenge in something new. And it was new. I had done my job similar to this, you know, before, but it was new products and new people on. So, but if it hadn't been for De Ann, you know, saying you should go ahead and come on in, I think that we can work through this. Then I probably wanted to interviewed cuz I was paranoid that I sure would get in trouble or something for the non-compete. But I hadn't thought it through enough and she all the rules, she helped me. She helped me think it through. So I was very appreciative to that. Yeah.

Mary:

So I'll kind of go back to my beginning cuz going from restaurant business to manufacturing, that's a big change was I, I didn't have a clue what I was doing and was actually probably shocked that I got the job. But it was all about customer service skills on how you spoke to people, how you've handled situations in the restaurant world. Those were the questions they basically asked me. And I, I obviously gave the right answers, but it is, I mean it's how you're gonna work with your coworkers, it's how you're going to work with the other departments. You know, whether you're working with people outside, whether it's customers or vendors, it's really about customer service and how you treat others. So you can change your field as well. You know, you may not have the education, but maybe you want to have that education. You can always start fresh

Denise:

And those skills don't change. Do they?

Mary:

You need customer service skills and that, and that, that builds trust among the coworkers.

De Ann:

But it's not only customer service to customers but your own within the company...

Mary:

It's all that. And that was, I, at the time when I first started, I, I was the print room I just worked with mostly the shop floor and some of the departments and it was about how fast they got they drawings out. If I could find the drawings, if I could find the old serial numbers. And I mean, we had decades worth of binders on the wall that, I mean, everything was hard copy back then. It was no electronic files. So that was the customer service was how fast I got that stuff out. And then I found it, apparently people before me were saying, eh, that doesn't exist. And then they just moved on. And in the meantime you've got guys in the field that are, you know, how many levels up on a, on a piece of equipment waiting for drawings that had to be overnighted to them in order to continue their job. So, I mean there's so many dynamics to it. Customer service always was what I fell back to and that's how I succeeded in moving up and also learning because then people trusted me. They would teach me more, they saw I could do it and it just kept, you know, snowballing from there. So over time you make it what you want it to be.

Lacey:

We appreciate the customer service in the shop cuz we are not good with that. That's where it differs. We get a little bit more hotheaded with each other.

Denise:

Any other stories anybody would like to share?

De Ann:

Oh, let's see, what was another story Lacey told us the other day.

Lacey:

The lady at the bank.

De Ann:

The lady at the bank.

Lacey:

Yeah. I I've, I've banked with the same bank for a long time and there was one girl I always dealt with and she was never all like friendly with me, but never rude, if that makes any sense. And I pulled up one day to deposit my check and she didn't turn her speaker off. And she goes, it's that dirty girl or the girl that's always dirty. And I was like, excuse me. And I'm, I lost my cool because that's who I am. Oh yeah. And she's, I've lost you. It's just, it's crazy how many like, just rude comments you'll get. Like when I get off work, I'm not gonna go home and shower and then go back to town to buy my groceries or go to the bank.

So you're gonna see me, my work clothes, I don't always look okay. I look like I've been through the ringer some days,

Denise:

...you know, but you probably were making more money than she was...

Lacey:

Oh, hands down... hands down.

De Ann:

But we did see her Saturday with her bling on, didn't we? I think you and had a little bit of makeup on stuff.

Lacey:

I did that did go to church the next day. Yeah, I just, I did go to church the next day. That was hot date. That sounds weird.

Denise:

Well, I want to thank each of you, Deanne, Lacey, Laura, Mary, and Kimberly for being a part of this and for sharing stories so that we can share opportunities and the community and other places to have more women join us.

Thank you again for joining us on The Art of Engineering. I'd love it if you would share this episode with others in our industry and encourage them to subscribe wherever they get podcasts. In the meantime, we'd appreciate your five star review and would love to hear any comments or suggestions. Until next time, I'm Denise McIntosh from Custom Powder Systems online@custom-powder.com.