



Lynne Pretorius, Director at ITS Engineers, Treasurer of SAICE's Transportation Division, and Deputy-President of CESA

The power of giving back to the youth

Lynne Pretorius Pr Eng, a Director at ITS Engineers and a specialist in transportation engineering, has twenty years' experience in the field, making her one of the top women civil engineers in transportation. In this interview Lynne shares the highlights of her career with Debbie Besseling.

ENGINEERING NICHE – TRANSPORTATION

According to Lynne, the specialised field of transportation engineering ranges from road and pavement design at the implementation end of the spectrum, to policy making at the other end. Within these services are focus areas which include roads, traffic engineering, traffic impact assessments, public transport, non-motorised transport, aviation, etc. Lynne's area of expertise is in the field of integrated transport planning, which is all about the integration of land use and transport. This includes public transport planning and design, and non-motorised transport planning and design.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

About the essential skills that are needed for a career in transportation engineering, Lynne says: "I was once told that if you want to refer to yourself as a transportation engineer, you must hold a Master's Degree in transport."

She continues: "In this field it is essential to be able to think beyond your own discipline. The integration of transport and land use is a field where you are required to interact with professionals from many other disciplines, including urban designers, town planners, architects, landscape architects and general civil engineers. You must have the ability to interact and acknowledge the influences of other disciplines, so that you can advise on the most appropriate transport response."

Lynne explains how she chose transportation engineering as a profession: "In Grade 12 an engineering student came to our school to do a talk on civil engineering. I was interested in how he described the use of mathematics in solving engineering problems. I saw an opportunity and asked a lot of questions. The outcome of that was that I was offered a bursary and became a bursar with Van Wyk and Louw Consulting Engineers (which later became Aurecon). After I had completed matric I studied at the University of Cape Town and in 1993 obtained my civil engineering degree. In 1994 I started work with Van Wyk and Louw in Pretoria where I trained as a traffic engineer and registered as a professional engineer with ECSA in 1999. This was followed with a Master's Degree in Transportation in 2004 from the University of Stellenbosch. Now, nearly 20 years later, here I am as a transportation engineer."

A WOMAN IN THE TRANSPORTATION ENGINEERING INDUSTRY

When Lynne started her working career she was fortunate to be trained under a very capable senior woman engineer – Agnes McNamara. "Many of the attributes that I learnt from her, I still carry with me today. One of these is the fact that I am not a female engineer; I am an engineer. This is the way I have positioned myself and carried myself throughout my career. The lessons that I have learnt are to stick to what you are good at and be true to yourself.

"I've worked in the Cape Town and Western Cape environment for close to 20 years. When you develop your reputation to that extent, people accept you for who you are and for what you can deliver, and not because you are a female. It is your reputation that carries you," she says.

"This also has a lot to do with your maturity and your professional standing in the industry. It is all about how you project yourself. One thing that I can say is that I have accepted myself as a female, and I know who I am and what I am good at."

GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS

Lynne says the greatest achievement of her career has been to have started her own consulting firm, Pendulum Consulting, and to have run it successfully for eight years, where after it was incorporated into ITS Engineers, the company that she now works for.

“To have been elected as the Deputy-President of CESA (Consulting Engineers South Africa) has also been a defining moment in my career. It has elevated me to operate at a new level, with new challenges and new skills that need to be developed. I will be performing the role of Deputy-President for the period 2014–2015, which will then lead into the role of President in 2016.”

MESSAGE TO YOUNG GRADUATES

Pretorius has a message for young graduates who are pursuing a career in civil engineering: “As engineers we do such great things and contribute so much to what society needs. We are responsible for shaping the built environment that we live in, and this is such a remarkable contribution. My advice is to use your technical skills and get the job done, and remain focused on the great contributions that we can make.”

ENCOURAGING AND MENTORING THE YOUTH

“The development of young staff has been one of the most gratifying parts of my career, something that I have always been passionate about. To be able to work with graduates just out of varsity, and to train and mentor them, is something that I thoroughly enjoy. Looking back on my own experience and how I was given the opportunity to go into the field of transportation engineering, I realise this happened because someone took the time to come and speak to the learners at our school on the topic of engineering. This is my way of making a difference, so I go to high schools and open days at universities and give talks on civil engineering.

“It is very exciting to work with young staff. They challenge you with the questions they ask. We are often in a comfort zone and continue with the ways in which we have always been doing things. But working with young staff makes you realise that the world is changing and that young engineers are the innovators of the future.”

A TURNING POINT

Lynne is open about the fact that she failed her first year at university, and says that she was fortunate not to have been one of the drop-out statistics.

“At the time my father said: ‘Lynne, the world does not meet you half way.’ You must go out and get what you want – no one meets you half way. This is the most powerful message that I can give to young people.

“I put my pride in my pocket and did what needed to be done, and I went back. The lesson to be learnt was that this experience was not the end of the world. Today I can proudly say that I have run my own company in the field, I am currently a Director at a national company, and in the industry I participate at the highest level.”

Debbie Besseling

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