

Alumna working to pave way for women engineers

ALUMNI PROFILE

For most Purdue chemical engineering graduates, life after receiving their diploma is often filled with plenty of high-paying job offers, thanks to rigor and reputation of the program. But for Roberta Gleiter (then known as Roberta or Bobbie Banaszak), life after Purdue was a little different.

Gleiter received her bachelor's degree in chemical engineering in 1960 — when 1 in 10,000 engineers were women. As a result, discrimination — both in the workforce and sometimes even in the classroom — was alive and well.

After following the advice of one of her classmates who told her to not use her first name on her resume (and instead use her initials and last name), she got an interview for an engineering job at a chemical company. However, her interviewer was less than thrilled to discover that this stellar applicant was a woman.

"The industry was hostile toward women in the field," Gleiter says. "Despite the fact that I was fully qualified for the job I applied for, I was not allowed inside the chemical process area and instead was offered a job as a technical librarian."

Gleiter, who graduated near the top of her Purdue class, declined the job offer. Elsewhere, too, she found the attitude toward women in engineering to be unwelcoming. She then decided to take herself out of the job market, marry fellow Purdue alumnus John Gleiter (AAE'60) and start a family. She raised three children (Alexis, Christopher, and Nicholas) from 1960 to 1980, a time she remembers with great fondness and no regret. But she never stopped thinking about pursuing a career in engineering.

"My husband (who worked in the petroleum industry) and I talked engineering all the time, and I was hungry," she says.

Changing times

After participating in a National Science Foundation program to encourage and support re-entering women engineers in 1980, she was offered a job at Aerospace Corp., a federally funded research and development center based in Los Angeles that supports national security, civil, and commercial space programs. A few years later, she earned a master's degree from the University of Southern California in technical systems management.

During her career at Aerospace Corp., she was responsible for half of a billion dollars' worth of satellite software and received numerous commendations and awards. She officially retired from there in 2004 as a project engineer, but still works for them as a consultant.

Gleiter says that the workforce climate for women in the 1980s drastically improved from her experience in 1960, and things are even better today. But that doesn't mean equality has been achieved, she says.

Outreach and encouragement

She sees it as her mission to do what she can to encourage future and current women engineers. She has never forgotten the discrimination she experienced as a girl wanting to pursue engineering ("Everyone told my parents they were wasting their money sending a girl to Purdue to be an engineer") and wants to do what she can to make sure girls and women have the support they need.

Gleiter has held a variety of positions in the Society of Women Engineers, including national president in 1998–99, and is the co-founder and CEO of the Global Institute for Technology and Engineering (GIFTE), an organization that focuses on elevating the status of women in the technology and engineering workforce. Through her involvement in these organizations, she travels around the country to talk with females about careers in engineering.

"Women have so much to offer in the field of engineering," she says. "They are extremely intelligent and see the world differently than men. But girls face so many social pressures, and we lose them before college."

Gleiter says that encouraging women in the field gives her an unmatched sense of satisfaction.

"To know that I am inspiring women enhances my life," she says. "It touches my heart that I can help them recognize and achieve their dreams."

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