

A Woman's Place is In the Mines



Women mining professionals were rare when an act of Congress created the Mine Safety and Health Administration in the U.S. Department of Labor in 1978, and at first the new agency had no women at all. Today a woman with the MSHA logo on her hard hat no longer causes astonishment when she arrives at a mine. "Women have taken their places everywhere on the MSHA team," says David D. Lauriski, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Mine Safety and Health. "In enforcement, education and training,

and technical support – all the activities that we undertake with the goal of making safety a value and sending every miner home healthy at the end of every working day."

All of the women who have broken ground in this nontraditional career field have interesting anecdotes to share. The following five individuals represent MSHA women who have held a variety of jobs both in industry and in the federal government. Here are their stories.



■ **Diane Watson** was drawn to non-traditional jobs like a magnet. From installing solar systems atop houses in Nevada, to shipping weapons and ammunitions to law enforcement agencies throughout California, Watson seemed destined to land in an industry that boasts few women in its ranks.

For five years, Watson held a variety of jobs at an open pit gold mine, from haul truck driver to bulldozer operator to loader and grader. “Basically I worked my way through all the equipment,” she says. Her work ethic and company smarts were noticed by an MSHA mine inspector, and she was encouraged to apply for a job at MSHA. “That was when I realized how serious MSHA people are about what they do. I wanted to be a part of that,” says Watson.

Since 1998, Watson has regularly inspected the nearly 50 metal and nonmetal surface mines in her northern California territory. Watson takes seriously the responsibilities of her job, and the gratification she seeks is simple and heartfelt. “I know that I have the capacity to save lives,” she says. “There are days when I talk to the miners and I know they are really listening, and maybe I’ve convinced them to change the behavior that could get them injured or killed. Those are the days when being a federal mine inspector is really worthwhile.”

■ **Linda Zeiler** wondered how far a double major in environmental sciences and religious studies would take her. For the first two years of her working life, it landed the Pittsburgh native a job at a lab at her alma



Photo: Neshan Naltchayan

mater, the University of Virginia. Then an opening at MSHA’s Toxic Materials Division drew her back to her hometown for an interview. Although she didn’t get the job, she did go back to school for yet another degree, this time in chemistry.

It paid off. In 1982, Zeiler was hired by MSHA’s Physical and Toxic Agents Division, where she spent 12 years. As a chemist, Zeiler analyzed gas samples at mine operations throughout the country where underground mine fires were actively burning. She juggled her job with courses at the University of Pittsburgh, where she would eventually earn a Masters Degree in Industrial Hygiene.

In 1995, Zeiler took a technical support job at MSHA headquarters in Arlington, where she headed an advisory committee studying the health effects of dust exposure on miners. That was followed by an assignment drafting a regulation on air quality and respiratory protection. By 2000, she had achieved a new feather in her hard hat — deputy

director of Technical Support. “The experience gave me much more exposure to the safety side of MSHA, whereas my background is primarily in health,” says Zeiler. “It was also worthwhile because I helped put together a list of recommendations for the improvement of MSHA’s overall impoundment inspection and plan review process.”

Certainly there are challenges in upper management, notes Zeiler. “It’s all about the big picture — meeting the goals of the Assistant Secretary and assisting the other program areas as best you can.” The picture has gotten a bit bigger of late. In August 2002, Zeiler was one of 27 people selected for the Labor Department’s Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program. “Achieving SES status requires a well-rounded understanding of all the components of an Agency. Again, it’s all about the big picture,” says Zeiler.

■ **Dani White** was a third-generation worker in the oil fields of Oklahoma, and had the industry boom continued, her career path might have been quite different. During a two-year stint in the Army, White was the first woman in her unit to work on heavy artillery. When her tour of duty ended, White returned home and spent the next seven years running cranes and building rigs in the oil fields of Oklahoma and west Texas.

By 1980, a shift in the economy led to cutbacks in the oil industry, and White found herself out of a job. Because of her experience running front-end loaders and haulage trucks, she didn’t stay unem-

ployed for long. For the next nine years, White worked at a limestone quarry on the Arkansas River operating crushing, loading, drilling and blasting equipment. Eventually, White moved up to superintendent and encountered the



Photo: Wesley Hitt

usual challenges that face those who manage. "It doesn't matter whether you are male or female, you have to win the confidence of the workers," she says. White's crew earned a number of safety bonuses and developed solid safety programs and initiatives during her tenure. "I was very proud of our safety record, which was a big factor on why I decided to take a job at MSHA," she says. In 1999, White entered MSHA's inspector training program and parlayed the skills she had garnered as a mine superintendent into her new position.

Today, her inspection territory covers 44 metal and nonmetal mines throughout Oklahoma. "I let the miners know how I am. And I ask them to be straightforward with me," she says. "I try not to preach to them about safety, but I relate a lot of my own experiences and near misses and what I could have done to prevent them," she continues. "They ask a lot of questions, so that tells me they're really listening."

■ In the 1970s, making inroads in a man's world was no easy task, but **Margaret Lally** took it all in stride. The mine safety and health specialist in MSHA's Office of Assessments is a veteran of the



Photo: Neshan Naitchayan

coal mining industry of Kentucky, her home state.

In 1972, Lally answered an ad for a keypunch operator at a coal company operating 13 mines in western Kentucky. Lally tackled her new job with energy and enthusiasm, and in no time was reassigned to the lab that analyzed coal prior to shipment to utility companies. For 10 years, Lally was in charge of sampling at the company's preparation plants, the processing centers where coal is cleaned and readied for distribution. "This was no office job. I was out at one of the plants every single day," she says. Eventually shifting gears, she applied to MSHA in 1992 and began her federal service as a mine inspector. This was something new, but not unwelcome. "I understood what happened after coal came out of the ground and is shipped off to the utility companies," says Lally. "Now I would find out what happens while it's being mined underground."

By 1997, Lally thought an assignment at MSHA headquarters in Arlington would provide her with better opportunities for advancement, so she applied for a job in the Office of Assessments. Here she would review citations for safety and health violations and determine what dollar amount to attach to each one. Lally's field experience has served her well in this position. "Whenever I pick up a fatality report, I can visualize exactly what they are talking about. It certainly helps me in assessing violations," she says.

■ There were plenty of reasons for **Cheryl McGill** to contemplate a career other than mining, but as she put it, "I was a very young single mother, I was independent and I was proud, and I needed a job." So in 1975, McGill signed on as a general laborer for an underground coal mine in western Kentucky. Not long after, she transferred into a two-year management trainee program that would enable her to complete an associate's degree and become a first-line supervisor at the mine. "At that point, I learned the distinction between a job and a career, and decided I wanted a career," she says. McGill headed to a coal mine in southern Illinois and began the career path of miner safety and health she continues to pursue. "I was part of long-range planning and management at the mine," she explains. "I interacted with individual miners, developed programs, and got involved in developing and submitting the mine plans required by MSHA."

In 1987, McGill was hired as a federal coal mine inspector in MSHA's District 10 office in Madisonville, Kentucky. "I knew that miner safety and health was an area I wanted to pursue, and I'd always had good working relationships with inspectors," she says. After five years as a mine inspector, McGill transferred in 1992 to Coal Safety in Arlington, where she remained for nine years.

In 2001, McGill reached yet another milestone in her career by becoming the first-ever female to



Photo: Shawn T. Moore

run an MSHA district office. The New Stanton, Pennsylvania office has 109 employees and 250 mines in its jurisdiction. "When I meet new groups for the first time, they are always curious about my background and qualifications," says McGill. "But today I don't even think in terms of not being accepted."

The high point of her career occurred in July 2002, when nine Pennsylvania coal miners were successfully rescued from 240 feet underground after being trapped for 77 hours. She has nothing but praise for the dozens of men and women who helped make that moment possible. "We hunkered down, worked non-stop, sparing nothing, and kept our shoulders to the wheel," says McGill. "For the first time we had an incredibly positive outcome and I don't think I'll ever live enough years to outdo that experience." ❏