

Article

Inspiring women in the AEC industry: Jennifer Casler

As part of our monthly series celebrating inspiring women in the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry, this month we're featuring Senior Associate, Jennifer Casler.

How many years have you been in the engineering and environmental field? What led you to pursue this career path?

I started my career in environmental consulting in 1990 in Virginia. While at college, I happened to take an Introduction to Geology course, and it satisfied both my scientific left brain and my creative right brain so well that I knew I wanted a career in the geology field. I found the study of geology and people working in the geology field in general to be a great mix of science, nature, and imagination and I wanted to be a part of that.

Describe your road to your college education and what you learned from it.

I was the first woman in my family history to go to college. I didn't recognize it as a privilege at the time, but my parents sacrificed a lot to send me, my brother, and my sister to college. My road to becoming a geologist and going to college started as early as kindergarten when I used to collect rocks. I used to say, "rocks are my friends."

Describe a project or other work experience you had that was a "game changer" in your career.

About 8 years into my career, I was working for a well-known regional consulting firm in Portland and there was a project need for a field geologist to work in an extremely remote fishing village in the North Slope of Alaska for three weeks. I was unsure of myself but something inside me told me to take the assignment, even though I was terrified! I was the only woman among a team of geologists, engineers, and chemists working around-the-clock shifts on an oil spill on the tundra. I worked hard and stayed focused, and after a few days, I was recognized as a valuable team member. I came away from that experience with a confidence in myself that I still draw from today.

I think it's important to understand that any time you push beyond your comfort level in your career, it's an opportunity to grow and experience! It can happen any time. Even perceived setbacks can become opportunities for positive change. This can happen weekly if you extend yourself to make new connections or understand a new tool or idea.

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What was the most helpful advice a mentor has shared with you?

I remember the most helpful advice I received was earlier in my career when I worked with a woman colleague who was a botanist. The advice she gave me was actually not verbal at all, it was how she carried and expressed herself as a female working in a male-dominated field. She carried her hand lens on a blue floral ribbon around her neck; she wore earrings and mascara! It helped me to realize that I didn't need to be self-conscious about just being me and still be taken seriously as a scientist and geologist.

What advice would you give young women or girls thinking about entering this profession?

- Seek out professional groups for women in your field.
- Join LinkedIn and find women professionals in your chosen field. Read their bios, send them a message and ask to join their network.
- Find a mentor in your field, you can have many mentors.

- Seek out other young women your age and discuss your profession, your careers, investments and money, and of course, go and do fun things.
- Let's talk financials: a wise colleague once told me "You might work hard, but your money works harder." So, my advice to all young people is to start saving earlier and use the benefit of youth and compounding interest to your advantage!

We've heard from others in our "Inspiring women in the AEC industry" series that a lot has changed for the better over the past 10 years with respect to gender diversity in the AEC industry. What shifts have you experienced and what additional changes do you hope to see in the future?

When I started out in my career, of course I was young and I didn't necessarily recognize discrimination by its name. I only recall many moments when I was made to feel less than, or "schooled" by an older male colleague, or laughed at because my male counterparts had never heard of an environmental geologist ("I like to sing, does that make me a singing engineer?!"). Once I moved to the Pacific Northwest in the early 1990s, attitudes about women in the science field were more progressive and I found myself really getting to experience true collaboration with teams of all ages and genders. It was so encouraging, it kept me in the industry.

I have been beyond impressed by both younger women and men entering the environmental consulting industry! They are collaborative, curious, they aim high, and many of the gender barriers I experienced early in my career have been reduced and even eliminated. I hope to see the trend continue where women not only take active leading roles in our field but in other industries as well. We are seeing this happen more every year. I am very impressed with the number and quality of women in leadership roles at H&A. I look forward to seeing more women in leadership roles in the future.

In what other ways would you like to see the industry change over the next decade with respect to diversity in general. Why, in your opinion, are diverse project teams stronger?

Diverse project teams absolutely are stronger! The more diverse, the more perspective, the less chance there will be of a "blind side" and the less chance of missing important details related to a project, a location, or community. Diverse teams mean that there will always be someone on your team who makes a connection with a client that only they can make. One or two people cannot be everything to everyone, especially with clients.

Read more about other Haley & Aldrich women featured in our "Inspiring women in the AEC industry" series:

Check out our other “Inspiring women in the AEC industry” blog posts with:

- Elizabeth Bishop
- Amy Murphy
