



# Celebrating WIC WEEK!

Only **9.9%** of the  
Construction Workforce  
Is **Female.**

## What Makes Our WICs Tick?

### **Michelle Mittel, EIT** *Geotechnical Staff Engineer*



F&R Dulles's Michelle Mittel is a go-getter. Right out of the civil engineering masters program at Virginia Tech, Michelle has proven invaluable to the Dulles Geotechnical group, managing drilling crews, subsurface explorations, laboratory testing and preparing engineering recommendations. Well-liked and respected by drillers (a tough crowd), co-workers and clients alike, Michelle is the very embodiment of a rising star in the engineering field.

#### **Was this career an accident or a plan?**

*MM: I would say this career was a little of both. My plan was always to go to college for something related to building and construction. Growing up I wanted to be an architect, and after a couple of high school classes and science projects I realized that I was more of a problem solver than creative thinker. I became interested in engineering from those experiences, and decided to study engineering in college. After taking all the basic Civil Engineering courses I realized that geotechnical concepts came easier to me. The lightbulb went off in my head when I was in grad school and I realized that I actually enjoyed learning about and thinking like a geotechnical engineer.*

#### **What are some roadblocks you have met along the way in your career/education?**

*MM: I failed a lot in undergraduate and graduate school – not necessarily grade-wise. Sometimes it takes me a long time to understand a concept, so I learned to ask A LOT of questions and always do my research. I also learned to assume that I'm never the smartest person in the room – there will always be another person who*



may have an important opinion to consider or a better answer/solution, so working together in a team is key. Also, there have been those in the past who have told me that I cannot succeed in my goals whether athletic, academic or a combination of the two. I remember every person who told me “I couldn’t...” and I proved them all wrong. It took a lot of time, effort, patience, and overcoming stressful situations but I succeeded nonetheless. Setting small attainable goals and surrounding myself with people who supported and challenged me were the keys to reaching my larger goals.

### **Why do you feel there is such a shortage of females in this industry?**

MM: We need to speak up more! Not necessarily in an informative, structured way like at a meeting or conference, but just in everyday situations like team events, jobsite meetings, or daily meetings with our bosses and coworkers. We also need to promote women in STEM fields in elementary and middle schools, when kids are just discovering their interests. I have been involved in so many outreach programs since starting college, and it’s so amazing to talk with kids (boys and girls) about my job! And it’s important that BOTH boys and girls see me – a woman – in my field of work talking about my life as an engineer. Not only does it show the girls what awesome things they can do when they grow up, but it also shows the boys that as well AND shows them that engineering is not just a men’s world. Breaking the stereotype/expectation when they’re young is a great step towards gender equality in the workplace.

### **What is your dream project – the type of project that just thrills you every time you get to work on one?**

MM: I’ve only been in the industry for 2 years, so I haven’t done that much in my career yet. However, I have done some work in the Appalachian Mountains, and I really enjoy working in that challenging terrain! Also, I would LOVE to do the geotech work for an amusement park... I’ve always loved roller coasters, and I think getting to help design the foundations and support systems for a roller coaster would be so much fun!

### **What project are you most proud of?**

MM: I am most proud of the first project I worked on for Dominion Energy at F&R: Winter’s Branch Substation. That was the first time I had combined my two top general interests within the civil engineering industry: geotechnical engineering and energy services. I worked as a co-op student transmission line engineer/standards engineer for a large energy utility for almost 2 years, and I really grew to love that work. Getting to do the geotech work for an energy-related project was when the fireworks went off in my head and I realized that I had succeeded in finding a career path that I’d like to explore.

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