

Background: Jamie Whittington (she/her), DEI Chair of Central Oklahoma ASHRAE, sat down with Stephanie Thomas, PE (she/her), Treasurer of Central Oklahoma ASHRAE, to interview Stephanie about her success as a woman in a male-dominated industry. This interview was held on Friday, November 15, 2024.

Thank you for taking the time to answer a few questions about yourself and your years of service to ASHRAE!

Q: First, could you tell me a little about your background? Starting with where you grew up and went to school?

A: I grew up in Oklahoma but moved to Indianapolis at 18. My dad was offered a job in that area, and he encouraged me to attend Purdue University. Since I was unsure of what to study, my dad challenged me to look into the engineering program at Purdue, knowing that this industry would be profitable. In college, I took an engineering elective, and my professor sponsored Purdue's ASHRAE chapter, leading me to join ASHRAE myself.

Q: How has your identity as a woman influenced your career in the engineering field?

A: Overall, my experience as a woman in a male-dominated industry has been positive. As one of the only women in my professional circles, I quickly became known as "that girl in engineering," which I used to my advantage to leave an impression on my colleagues. I believe that misogyny is not a result of the industry; rather, it's a personal thing. When I was in high school, I told my chemistry teacher that I wanted to be a chemical engineer. He quickly told me that I would be better suited as a teacher. I hated that! I felt more challenged and determined to study engineering because I was told that I couldn't do it. Men need to stop telling girls what they cannot do and embolden girls to go out of their comfort zone. Fortunately, I have found people who have championed me throughout my career.

Q: Can you share your journey to starting your own engineering firm? What challenges and opportunities have you faced as a woman in engineering? What advice would you give to young professionals from underrepresented backgrounds who are pursuing a career in engineering?

A: I joined Carrier in HVAC Sales, which prompted further participation in ASHRAE at a professional level. I realized that Sales was not my forte, as I am more introverted. After being in the industry for some time, I realized that I could run my own business so I could have a better work-life balance. I had two kids at home and was constantly traveling around the country for various projects. After seeing how the business worked, I asked myself, "why should I continue doing the same work for someone else if she could do this on her

own?" I was thrilled by the idea of running my own firm, making all the decisions, and controlling the outcome of my business.

Q: You have been in this industry for almost three decades. What progress have you seen in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion in this industry? Where do you think the industry still has room to grow? What advice would you give to young professionals from underrepresented backgrounds who are pursuing careers in engineering?

A: When I was entering the workforce, it was becoming more popular for the professional societies to begin female societies, chapters, and networking opportunities. It has been crucial for my success to network with other female engineers to have a channel to have others to relate with. I have enjoyed seeing more female engineers through my involvement in these organizations. My advice to young professionals from underrepresented backgrounds pursuing careers in engineering: you just have the guts to go for it. Get a mentor and establish your circle of cheerleaders for continued support.

Q: In 2016, you started your own engineering firm, with a very unique name: *Moxify Engineering*. What led you to take that risk and how did you come up with your company name? Your company bio states: "Moxify Engineering is a woman-owned and woman-controlled business..." How do you foster a culture of inclusion within your firm? How do you advocate for underrepresented groups within your professional circles?

A: In 2016, I started my engineering firm called "Moxify," which is a play on the word "moxie." This definition of "moxie," having energy, courage, and determination, is what I strive to achieve. I wanted a unique name that would be memorable—just like me when I first started in this industry. I pride myself on being open-minded and empathetic to others' experiences. I am proud to say that I have two female employees and one male employee. When making hiring decisions, I focus on a person's skillset, never their gender. I want to ensure that I am cognitively aware of others' experiences and want to foster a culture that is a self-managing team, offering flexibility for when life happens.

Q: Let's talk about your journey of being an ASHRAE member. In 2014, you were elected Central Oklahoma Chapter Treasurer and were the first female chapter officer we've had in 25 years (*Chapter's first female president was in 1984, and the second in 1988. No female officers after that until Stephanie in 2014. Chapter's 3rd female president was in 2019*). Congratulations for serving 10 years! How did you get involved? What are your thoughts, in general, about woman and minorities in the engineering and construction fields... where we've come from and where we're going?

A: While studying at Purdue University, I took an engineering elective. My professor was the sponsor of my local ASHRAE chapter, which prompted me to join. When I began my career at Carrier, the HVAC Sales Team supported my participation in our local ASHRAE chapter. Initially, I was chair for the student affairs and would occasionally help our treasurer with registration during events. Unfortunately, the treasurer passed away and I took over this position.

I served in this position for several years until I returned to Oklahoma. Through word of mouth, someone found out I was the treasurer of my ASHRAE chapter in Indiana, so I transitioned into this role naturally.

I'm excited to see female contractors more frequently in the industry. I remember being the only woman at the ASHRAE meetings. I think that the trend with STEM focuses on schools will allow more opportunities for women to go into engineering. We need men to stop telling girls and young women that they can't do things.

Q: Have you ever thought about becoming chapter President? I'm sure you've been asked to consider it.

A: Being chapter president does not appeal to me currently. This is a large time commitment that I do not have the bandwidth to achieve.

Q: What's your vision for a more inclusive engineering industry, and what steps do you think organizations like ASHRAE can take to get there?

A: It would be great to see smaller companies sponsor events and meetings, not just from large corporations like Boeing, for example. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Chair used to be known as "Women in ASHRAE," so I love to see this being more inclusive. Overall, I would love to see more activities that are directly related to women, run by women, but inviting our male colleagues to attend for them to show their support and have meaningful conversations about the woman's experience in a male-dominated industry.

