

Lowering the Ladder to Learn and Grow

Welcome to the Lowering the Ladder Series - a selection of interviews designed to inspire, empower, and encourage each other in the health and safety profession. Those times when we lower the ladder to help someone up, or are encouraged to climb the ladder ourselves, can be turning points in our lives, supporting us as individuals, and the profession as a whole.



Name: Min Tobenhouse

Position: Health and Safety Coordinator, FAST Harvesting Ltd

Tell us a bit about your current role

My current role as a Forestry Health and Safety Coordinator with FAST Harvesting spreads far and wide! I work with our crews to ensure that the team is prepared to complete the job safely in the forever-changing conditions that we work in. When you have teams working in the forest, you need to plan for the day, discuss the area hazards, consider the weather and trust that everyone is confident to raise their concerns every day.

You can find me conducting a toolbox meeting, doing crew audits, arranging training, preparing an emergency drill, behind the computer loading events or even driving a loader or processor when we need an extra hand. Although a big part of my role is also to engage with forest owners and work to meet and exceed their requirements.

What got you started in Health and Safety?

I became a forestry apprentice when I was 18 years old. I wasn't sure what to do when a family friend who had a harvesting crew said he would give me a chance if I could start a chainsaw; I just needed to be strong enough. Since then, he always treated me the same as the boys and trained me until I became a loader driver. I loved it, and I was keen to help anywhere so one day, they needed someone to complete the health and safety plans for the crew, and I jumped in. I thought it was exciting; using a computer was easy for me, so I read everything and put together all the plans, and it all started from there.

Who has helped you get where you are and how?

Three men have supported me and pushed me to do more throughout my forestry career. One is Ernie Packer (the old fella), who owned a harvesting crew that worked in a corporate forest under a Māori trust. He took me under his wing and showed me how the industry worked; I learned all the ins and outs from him, which allowed me to understand the crews, their job, and the risks they encounter every day.

The other one is Michael Alexander (Smiley), my current boss, who always cares for the wellness and safety of his staff, way beyond his duty. He passes that on to all of us but, more importantly, he believes in your potential and empowers you to do what you have to do.

And also I can't pass my partner, Nolan Takao. He supports me in any decision I make regardless; he is proud of everything that I've done, and that makes a huge difference.

Were there any pivotal moments in your career, that were difficult at the time, but you look back on and understand the value of the experience? What did you learn and how has that helped you?

As a woman in forestry, you are always out-numbered by men, and sometimes they feel threatened by a woman that can do the same job. I had an incident with a guy that wanted to use a machine that was unsafe to use. I locked the machine out and told him that he shouldn't use it; we were in the forest, far away from anyone that could see, so he started yelling and threatening me. But I stayed strong and soon enough, the rest of the crew showed up. He ended up apologising, and it was then that the culture began to change. I learnt that it is very important to stand up for what is right - you know, having your morals and understanding of what is right, regardless of what everyone says to you, as long as you back yourself, you are not wrong.

How do you encourage others to learn and grow?

As I tell my girls, if you want something, do not make excuses! Find a way to get it done; if it is difficult, sit down and think of another way. I always encourage them to put the effort in when they want something.

Share one thing with us that you have learned in your career

Believe in yourself; always believe in yourself.

The old fella was the one that changed my mindset because it didn't matter what it was; if I said I couldn't do something, he challenged me and asked me, "Why? Because you are a girl?" Then said, "It doesn't matter, you can do it", sometimes he would say "Think about it - it is not about strength, it's about technique". He made me think that it didn't matter. I could do anything. So every time I ended up doing what I had to, I noticed that I was always able to do it, I just had to believe in myself.

When did you last lower the ladder?

If you have an inspirational story to share, the WISE NZ Group would love to hear from you. Please get in touch via LinkedIn.