

Renee M. Schoenborn, P.E., WYA '85

Endowment for the Wyoming Alpha Chapter at University of Wyoming

BORN IN La Mirada, CA, Renee pursued her degree in electrical engineering at the University of Wyoming as her family had moved to the state during her high school years. She notes that she started out as an instrument engineer at the Shell Oil Company Deer

Park Refinery supporting operations and maintenance. Recently, she has come full-circle in her career and was re-assigned to the refinery as Team Lead for the Control Systems Project Engineering group.

Renee has a passion for capital project work and has pursued this in instrumentation, automation, and process control in project support for most of her career. She enjoys being part of each stage including early project scoping, detailed engineering and design, through construction. “The ability to see the whole process, from conception to production is fascinating. While seeing a design on paper is nice, there’s still nothing as cool as watching the real hardware rise up from the ground.”

By mid-career, Renee was assigned to a “mega-project” on Sakhalin Island, Russia, where Shell built a \$22 billion integrated project, including a liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant and oil export terminal. Renee took part in the engineering and design work which was done in Yokohama, Japan, for 1½ years. She went on to Sakhalin and spent four years constructing the infrastructure and production units. Then she headed to the Canadian Oil Sands in Alberta to help build Shell’s expansion Upgrader, a process that turns bitumen into synthetic crude.

Next Move

Her next move took her back to Houston working in the projects and technology group as a control systems engineering manager. She was supporting major capital projects for the Americas, plus managing reviews and audits of the management process for safety shutdown systems. “Our priority is to deliver projects and products safely. To do this, we have to be ever-vigilant that our safety systems are functional and operate correctly—every time. So we continually audit ourselves to ensure that our management processes keep our safety systems healthy and ready to use, if that barrier is ever needed.”

Shortly after moving back to the Deer Park Refinery, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston. Renee remembers, “For the most part the process units didn’t have a lot of problems in drying out and restarting—it was more the flooding that affected the effluent treaters, tank bunds, and dock areas that kept us down for so long. We

had water-filled junction boxes, submerged pumps and instruments...water everywhere.” To compound the problem, there were scheduled maintenance turnarounds planned to begin on October 1 for several of the chemical production units. Instead of cleaning up and preparing to re-start those units, the decision was made to begin the maintenance immediately, even though preparations weren’t fully complete for all the work to begin yet. It’s been a very long two months since Harvey hit, but satisfying to see so much come together so well.

Renee enjoys long-distance running and is looking forward to an annual favorite race in November for the eighth time since 2010. She also enjoys international travel, has been across most of Europe, and notes a 2015 trip to Northern Ireland where she visited the Giants Causeway known for striking hexagonal column formations. She spends time with family; her mother also lives in the Houston area. Renee is also active in her church.

Reflecting on her time growing up in Wyoming, “I was a pretty dutiful and nerdy kid; much harder on myself than my parents were. The lesson I remember learning from my Dad was about not being pride-filled. Sometimes you’re asked to do tasks that don’t make sense or seem below you. But if you can see beyond these trivial things, great things can be accomplished.” Renee shares that it’s taken her many years to figure out her personal leadership style, but sees her role as a team lead to remove obstacles so her teammates can do their jobs. “The whole concept of ‘they work for me’ doesn’t exist on my team...I work for them.”

Thinking of the young engineers and students today, she stresses the importance of learning interpersonal, leadership, and management skills, adding, “It’s important to know how to make an effective presentation or a strong argument. Just spitting out data doesn’t do much good. You can show people all the technical data, graphs and charts, but the real question is: why should we spend the shareholder’s money on this?” Her advice for students is, “Success in engineering is in large part being able to understand the problem and describe it to others to get buy-in to your pragmatic solution.”

When Renee was a student and President of Wyoming Alpha, she attended the annual TBPI Convention during the centennial celebration of 1985 at Lehigh, PA. Her experiences there, and with her local chapter, made her want other UW students to freely have the same opportunity. And giving to the Chapter Endowment Initiative does this!

