



Young, gifted and female – Milburn's Sheralyn Hume

If seeing the environmental lobby as a positive challenge for the concrete industry isn't enough to make Sheralyn Hume stand out from the crowd, being young, gifted and female should do it. Hume, Operations Manager at Milburn's Westport cement works, is committed to the principles that will bring about a more environmentally friendly industry – and has the technical know-how to help make that happen.

“There are some really exciting challenges ahead in terms of environmental performance,” she says. “The cement industry has typically been seen as one of those energy-intensive, resource-hungry industries, [but] there's a lot that we can do to help, for example solving some of New Zealand's problems with waste material. There's been a lot of controversy recently about landfills and waste management, and there is an opportunity there for us to get value out of some of those products by incorporating them into the cement production process. It needs good technical expertise, good communications, it really means being on top of our control processes so that we can be confident that we are doing things in a safe and effective manner, but it's something really promising.”

In a role that combines technical and production issues, 30-something Hume has responsibility for environmental and process engineering, cement production and quality control at a works that produces 500,000 tonnes of cement each year. She is one of the company's representatives on Cement Industry Energy Management Association, and sees the issues raised for the concrete industry by the green lobby as a wake-up call.

“In New Zealand we always talk about being clean and green, but the reality is that in terms of our ability to recycle and re-use materials we've had it too easy for too long and haven't had to come up with the good solutions. Yet New Zealanders are incredibly innovative when they put their minds to it, so I think we could really set a good example for other parts of the world.”

Hume started at Milburn in 1998 as Technical Manager, with responsibility for the quality and laboratory sides of cement manufacture, process engineering and the environmental

performance systems. When the Production Manager decamped to Fiji, the company decided to move her into a role that put technical and production management together.

“I really enjoy it. The previous Production Manager wasn't a technical expert, but then I was there to do that for him. I've got the people management skills as well as the technical background, so it made sense for me to pick that aspect up when he left.”

Hume garnered those people skills working for Comalco in Australia, in what she describes as another masculine industry; by its very nature logical and organised.

So how did she end up in a cement works?

A graduate in chemistry, something she “drifted into” with the encouragement of an excellent teacher, Hume started in the aluminium industry with Swiss Research Group R&D Carbon. The company offered her work experience, then encouraged her to complete a PhD – which entailed splitting her time between university in Auckland and the company facilities in Switzerland for three years. With a thesis on the “influence of raw materials on reactivity of carbon anodes used in the production of aluminium,” Hume had, it seemed, found her niche.

While it sounds easy in retrospect, life in Switzerland for a Kiwi who spoke only English must have had its moments. While Hume says she struggled to learn French, she persevered – and by the time she left, four years later, she had a Swiss husband (who when they met spoke three or four languages, none of which was English).

Her next stop was in Australia for industry giant Comalco. Hume started in a research engineering role, and was soon

encouraged to move into production management – becoming Superintendent of Carbon at the Gladstone smelter.

“But I got homesick and wanted to come back to New Zealand, so I did a jump from aluminium to cement – they are very similar processes.”

Westport might not be everyone's cup of tea (although there are some claims that it has the best café in New Zealand), but it suits Hume and husband Silvio perfectly. Silvio's lifetime passion for fishing has resulted in a new business as a fly fishing guide, and they live a short walk from the plant, “right on the beach.”

“I'd been out of the country for 10 years and it was nice to come home. I was sick of being ribbed when the All Blacks lost; it is nice to be here and help celebrate when we win and have other people to commiserate with when we lose!”

The switch from aluminium to concrete was fairly straightforward. “The chemistry is slightly different, but because of my chemistry undergraduate degree I picked that up reasonably well. Production processes are fairly similar, as is the environment – the noise, the heat, the scale of operations. [And] because Milburn is part of the Holcim Group, I was sent to Switzerland for six weeks on a technical training course that provided a very quick immersion in the cement industry, which was really helpful.”

And Holcim, she has been pleased to discover, is pushing the whole issue of sustainable development right from the top. “It is not lip service.”

That idea of being a female in a male world? Surely it has had some impact?

She acknowledges wryly that “a lot of women don't see what's so attractive about working in the cement industry,” but in practice, says age has had more impact on her experiences and views.

“[As a female] you have to prove that you're capable of doing what you're doing, but everybody has to do that. But anybody in my role who is going to be successful in the long term has to acknowledge [the issue of sustainable development], and rather than waiting for someone to come along and say you must, it is far better to come up with a good solution that can be a win-win for everybody. Maybe my age makes it easier... younger managers are more attuned to this, it is more part of our culture.”

“And I'd encourage anybody, male or female, with an interest in technical and people management to consider the cement industry as an attractive career option.”

Hume says she gets tremendous satisfaction out of “pulling it all together,” managing her 34 staff and seeing them excel in different areas. And technical issues continue to be a source of great intellectual stimulation. Understanding how the product behaves and what causes it to behave in that manner; optimising a blend of materials in order to get the required characteristics: “this is exciting, you see new uses and products that can solve the issues that concrete people have.”

Completing a Henley Management College MBA – undertaken to broaden her overall business knowledge and management skills – is the next goal. “Ultimately I'd like to have more responsibility for my own total business unit. I've been production/technically focused, but there's a lot more to a business than just the operation.”

In her “spare” time, she's a keen trumper. Hume might have grown up in the city (“sort of – Glenfield was then semi-rural, and I spent weekends on Kawau Island”) but she is now a South Island convert. “I just love being outdoors.”

While she's only learning to fish, it is probably just as well Silvio practises catch and release – Seralyn Hume is definitely not the kind of person who does things by halves. “I wouldn't say that's my passion – but I have caught a few nice trout.”

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