

Kicking goals out west

Mid West Ports CEO Dr Rochelle Macdonald talks career, mentors and offers some thoughts for the future. By Jillian Carson-Jackson

I RECENTLY MET WITH DR ROCHELLE

Macdonald. Rochelle has worked in executive roles for ports across Australia. About 18 months ago, she took on the role of CEO of Mid West Ports Authority in Geraldton. In her time at MWPA she has fostered diversity and inclusion. She has a strong team including three women and two men on the executive team. Rochelle loves the maritime industry where no two days are the same.

How did you first become interested in working in the maritime environment?

When I was 13, I decided I wanted to follow in my grandfather's footsteps, to be a geologist (he was a prospector and mining engineer) and ultimately be the head of an organisation that makes a difference to Australia. Grandpa had the best job, travelling the world, being an advisor to the World Bank and United Nations and working in remote parts of the world including the Amazon rainforest, Peru, South Africa, the Pilbara and the Mid-West of WA. Although a traditional man, when I told him I was going to become an engineer or geologist he became an amazing mentor and hard task master.

How did your career progress to maritime?

I started my career as an environmental engineering geologist for a boutique engineering company in Tasmania. I moved to Perth in 2000 where I transitioned into maritime work, running soil investigations throughout WA, working on large offshore developments and port expansion projects including Geraldton Port Expansion Project, Wheatstone Project, Pluto project, and Greater Gorgon. In 2008 I decided to transition from technical specialist to management. I approached my career as a project, with timelines, activities and 'deliverables'. This structure has been supported via education and personal development.

What has mentorship meant to your career?

At each stage, mentors acted as sounding boards and provided me with support and guidance, as well as challenging me to be my best. My pathway to the industry was through my BSc Hons (Earth Science) at UTAS where Bruce Gemmell, head of school at UTAS, helped me fall in love with earth sciences. My grandfather was a mentor throughout.

Some of the best advice he provided me with was to avoid doing a PhD until I had served five-years in the field. When I did do my PhD at Curtin, he continued to be an amazing mentor. I learned the ropes of major projects through a Master of Engineering Management at UTS. Tony Byrne taught me about coastal infrastructure and the role ports play in Australia's economic development.

Grant Gilfillan, then CEO of Port of NSW, guided me through the intricacies of port operations and the maritime industry as I navigated the Company Directors Course. He also helped me learn how to approach difficult conversations in a male-dominated industry. Brendan Hammond, chair of the Dampier Port Authority, helped me 'think big'.

What challenges do you have with working in the maritime industry?

There have been challenges, each one of them shaping who I am. Being a female in a male-dominated industry, I felt I had to be more qualified (perceived or otherwise), take on harder jobs and push harder. At the start of my career, there was push-back relating to me going offshore, with many people believing it was bad luck to have women onboard.



Dr Rochelle Macdonald with Jake Edwards [left] from mental health group Outside the Locker Room and former AFL star "Dipper"

I have positioned myself and have been fortunate to have 'champions', those who saw my potential and were willing to 'give me a go'. I also made some tough choices to only work for organisations aligned with my values and that put employees, the community and customer at the centre. I have taken this belief to MWPA, the effect of which has been recognised through winning the 2018 MWCC Community Spirit Award and full support for the Port of Geraldton Master Plan.

What are your thoughts about diversity and inclusion?

I have seen more change in the maritime industry empowering women in the last two years than in the past 22 years of my career. My view is there is still a long way to go. This starts with educating girls at high school about career options. Men also need to change the way they think. There needs to be a shift from "women are taking our jobs" to "what a great opportunity for our children, and grandchildren". If it wasn't for my grandfather telling me about his job with such passion, and my parents supporting me, I wouldn't be doing what I do. I believe in equality and equal opportunity and I think this is something missing from our industry. ■