

Reflections of Sharon Cole

If there were a theme to this reflection on my time at Louisiana State University and the years since, it would most certainly be "I couldn't have imagined." I couldn't have imagined the impact that my Chemical Engineering degree from LSU would have on my life, or the doors it would open or the opportunities it would provide.

I didn't graduate high school with the intent to pursue an engineering degree. The product of a hard working middle class family in Baton Rouge, a college degree was not the norm. I certainly was not familiar with chemical engineering and had never met a chemical engineer until I enrolled at LSU. A series of unrelated and ordinary circumstances led me to LSU in the summer of 1978 and I couldn't have imagined how profoundly those incremental turns changed my life.

I started college at Southeastern University in Hammond in August of 1976 to pursue a nursing degree. An illness and subsequent surgery that fall resulted in multiple hospital stays over several months. It was during those experiences that I determined I did not have the patience or emotional fortitude to care for the sick and injured. I gained great respect for the nursing profession, but decided that it was not for me. I changed my major to chemistry. I was good in math and science and there were several big chemical plants in the Baton Rouge area, so a "lab" job seemed like a good idea.

Three semesters later, personal circumstances resulted in my transferring to LSU. My chemistry professor at Southeastern suggested that I should look into chemical engineering, and said that the LSU program was very good and the career options were broad. I respected and trusted him profoundly, so I thought "Why not? Chemical engineering it will be!" I

spent the next three years chipping away at the course requirements and obtained my B.S. degree in June of 1981.

I have such strong and lasting memories of those years. Not all of them are related to my course work. Things like the smell of sweet olive, the great thousand island salad dressing in the Union cafe, and polishing the Tau Beta Phi bent in the CEBA (now Patrick F. Taylor Hall) court yard, come to mind! I have wonderful memories of people who influenced and helped me on campus. I developed a long lasting friendship with a fellow chemical engineering student, Gretchen LeBlanc. She was a stabilizing and powerful role model for me- even back then. I am truly blessed to still be her friend and working with her at Dow Chemical today. We students viewed our professors as larger than life (I still view them this way), and they taught me much more than engineering. From them I learned discipline, which that I needed to really work hard for what I wanted, that there isn't always a simple answer, and to respect the chemical engineering profession.

A few professors were particularly prominent in my memories. First is Dr. David Wetzel. He was the "cool" professor to us undergrads. Dr. Wetzel has a true gift for teaching and he made very difficult concepts clear and meaningful. He maintained a sense of humor and creativity in the classroom that was refreshing. For example, I still remember a test question from his class exam. It involved calculating the heat transfer coefficient of a crawfish shell! I haven't been able to eat a crawfish since without thinking about that. The students at LSU are so lucky to still have Dr. Wetzel in the classroom today.

Second, I must comment on Dr. Art Sterling. Dr. Sterling was my advisor and he gave me such good direction and coaching. He helped me to

learn to think ahead of the immediate short term- a skill that doesn't come naturally to a 19 year old!

Finally, I must acknowledge Dr. Ed McLaughlin. Dr. McLaughlin was teaching, but also became the chair of the Department during my time at LSU. He was tough, but I recognize in hindsight that he set the standards for the Department and the students. Without his leadership, would my degree have been as powerful as it turned out to be? Could I have been as successful? I thank him for his setting the bar very high.

I have had occasion to visit with all three of these outstanding former and current faculty members in recent years. I never could have imagined that I'd be meeting with them almost 30 years after graduation and that they would remember me! I humbly and respectfully extend to them my most sincere appreciation.

Life after LSU began for me on June 15, 1981 when I started my new job as a manufacturing engineer in Dow's Louisiana Operations Chlor Alkali plant. I had the opportunity to work in many plants in many roles for the next several years. Those jobs were tough with many long hours and challenging situations. I grew up both personally and professionally during those years. While I was never the technical expert, I learned to think on my feet, to deal with the unexpected and to make decisions and act on them; skills that have served me well. I learned to respect the awesome power and capabilities of chemical engineering. During this time, I met my husband, Stan, also a Dow employee. I couldn't have imagined that my engineering degree would have led me to my life long partner and best friend.

In the 1990's I was given opportunities to assume larger leadership roles in Dow. I was entrusted with managing assets worth hundreds of millions of dollars and with leading, developing and working with amazing people. I never could have imagined that Dow would have so much faith in me and my highest career aspirations were exceeded.

In the late 1990's, my husband and I were offered assignments in our Freeport, Texas site. This turned out to be a wonderful professional and personal move for us, as we both took on larger roles and made very dear friends. I had moved into technology leadership roles, first in the Vinyl

Business and later in Hydrocarbons. It was during these roles that I learned that the world was bigger than the United States! Our information technology capabilities allowed me to routinely interact with people all around the globe. I gained both knowledge and appreciation for Dow's global capabilities and the many cultures in which they operated.

I had the opportunity to travel extensively in my role as technology director for Dow's global Hydrocarbons business in the mid-2000's. I never could have imagined the sights I would see or the people I would meet. I've visited major cities such as Shanghai, Buenos Aires, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur. I've been to the top of the Petronas Towers and swam in the South China Sea. I've seen the revitalization of eastern Germany. I've shopped the gold and spice souks in Dubai. I've climbed the Great Wall in China and walked the La Rambla in Barcelona. I'm amazed at the street foods in the local outside markets in Beijing- think "bug-ka-bob." All of this was possible while visiting Dow sites and working on incredible Dow projects. I never could have imagined that I would see so much of the world.

In mid-2007, I was offered the role of site director for Dow's Louisiana Operations in Plaquemine. The site is one of Dow's largest and the largest in the state with over 3,000 Dow and contract employees and four billion dollars in assets. This was a role I long aspired to, but never expected to realize. This role brought me full circle- back to Baton Rouge and the site where I first started. I am so grateful to Dow for this opportunity.

So, as you can see, my chemical engineering degree from LSU truly changed my life. To now be honored by becoming a member of the LSU College of Engineering Hall of Distinction is perhaps the most incredible turn that I never could have imagined. I am so humbled by the accomplishments of the past recipients of this recognition and simply can not compare my achievements to theirs. I can only be grateful to those who have helped me and supported me through the years allowing me to succeed. These include my loving family, my husband, my many outstanding leaders and peers at Dow and my wonderful friends. I also thank Dr. K. T. Valsaraj for bringing my nomination forward for consideration. This is truly a pinnacle of professional achievement and one for which I sincerely say "Thank you". No, I never could have imagined...