



Women in Welding: Ellie Smith

Having finished her apprenticeship last year and earned a Certificate III in Light Metal Fabrication at TAFE NSW, Ellie Smith is a Sheet Metal Fabricator at Mars Food Australia. This year Ellie decided to further her skills and is currently working towards a Certificate IV in Engineering Fabrication and attempting a Gas Tungsten Arc Welding (GTAW) pressure ticket. Ellie was the first female to undertake both courses at TAFE NSW and is excited to be paving the way for other women. Ellie recently answered some questions about her career so far.

Can you describe your job?

I am a Sheet Metal Fabricator and Welder at Mars Food Australia (MFA) that is best known as the maker of MasterFoods, Dolmio, Uncle Ben's and KanTong. As one of MFA's Reliability Workshop Team, my job is to ensure that all the lines of equipment in our factory are running efficiently. That sees me doing purge welding of food grade tube, fabricating sheet metal boxes, undertaking project engineering work, maintenance welding and mechanical support. I am also a buddy/mentor to our newest welder apprentice, Holly Collins. We are the only two apprentice welders and fabricators in MFA's apprentice program.

What inspired you to choose a career in welding?

I have never let stereotypes dictate the paths I have chosen in life. I race mountain bikes which is predominantly male-dominated, so when my coach who is a contracted plumber at MFA told me about the apprentice program and upcoming opportunities, I was keen to give it a go.

I was really lucky that after the business offered me my apprenticeship, they gave me a two-week internship to get a feel for what I would be doing before I had to make a decision to accept or not. In those two weeks, I learnt the basics of GTAW and all about Mars, and I loved every second!

With my parents and schoolteachers' support I made the decision to leave school in Year 11 and pursue

a career in welding at a world class, global, family-owned, principles and purpose-driven business.

Why do you think women should consider a career in welding?

I think women should consider a career in welding as it is a chance to learn a specialised skill, earn good money, and stay physically active. A lot of women have good attention to detail and patience, which is a requirement for this career. The profession offers a sense of accomplishment and a multitude of job opportunities and options for further studies after completing your trade.

Do you have any advice for women considering a career in welding?

My advice for women considering a career in welding is be prepared for a challenging but rewarding career. Learning to weld isn't something you learn overnight, it's a process that takes patience and persistence. Having the confidence to give it a go and not be scared of failure is key. You have to make mistakes to learn so it is important not to be too hard on yourself. It is awesome to learn a specialised skill and get paid to do so!

In my experience learning my trade has helped boost my confidence, practical and problem-solving skill, and general happiness. I learn something new every day. At Mars, I am surrounded by people who love their job and are always willing to help out and pass on their knowledge. If you are considering it, just go for it, you will probably surprise yourself! Four

years ago, I never imagined myself to be where I am today, and I am excited to continue developing my skills into the future.

Have you found working in a traditionally male-dominated industry difficult? If so, how have you overcome any challenges?

I have not found working in a male dominated industry difficult. I am fortunate to work at Mars Food, a family-owned company that is committed to its five principles - Quality, Responsibility, Mutuality, Efficiency and Freedom. Mars embraces a culture of belonging and strives for gender equality, with programs such as 'Full Potential' that aims to unlock opportunities for women. I have always been treated with respect and kindness by my male colleagues.

Personally, I found my biggest barrier was actually my own self-confidence which has grown throughout my apprenticeship with the support and inclusive nature of Mars and the Reliability Workshop team have shown me.

What is the most interesting project you have worked on?

The most interesting project I have worked on was fabricating an intricate tube work project that extended from one side of the Mars factory to the other and back, which in total is 150m. This was the first project that I was heavily involved with from start to finish. In total the project consisted of 290 purge welds (288 welded by me) on a range of tube sizes from 1 inch to 4 inch. The project took about seven weeks to complete and I was very satisfied when we tested the lines and all the welds were sound.

Who has inspired you professionally?

Several people have inspired me professionally. The first was Shayne Jones, who sadly passed away last year after a battle with leukemia. Shayne hired me as an apprentice and gave me the opportunity to learn a trade. He was my manager and invested a lot of time and energy into my development. His trade and management skills inspired me, and I admired the

way he was always able to bring out the best, not just in his team, but anyone around him

He pushed me to try my best at work, TAFE and in my mountain bike racing. He supported me by helping organise fundraisers so I could race in the Down Hill Mountain Bike World Championships in Switzerland, and I am sure Shayne would be very proud of my achievements and the hard work I am putting into my development this year.

The tradesman I work with in MFA's Reliability Workshop Team, Chris Ambrose inspires me too, with his expertise. After many years of working in the trade he has lots of knowledge and skills to pass on, and does so every day willingly.

My TAFE teachers also inspire me, especially Danny Maffione who gave me the confidence to enrol in my Cert IV and my current teacher Mick Wardle who is a two time Hunter Region WorldSkills winner and first class welder who I feel privileged to learn from each week.

What do you believe is the biggest challenge for the industry at the moment?

I think one of the biggest challenges for the industry at the moment is keeping welders up to date with the latest technologies and continued training to maintain and improve skill levels for the ongoing demand of the welding industry.

What do you believe is the biggest opportunity for the industry at the moment?

A big opportunity for the welding industry is for businesses to utilise the current government incentives which target the employment of new apprentices. I also think an effort to display welding in a more attractive light could help the industry appear more appealing to young people and especially women. This could result in larger number of people considering careers as welders which, considered the projected demand in the Australian industry is necessary.

