

Women in Welding: Skylar Wright

Boilermaking is second nature to Skylar Wright. From a young age, Skylar knew that she wanted to pursue a career in a trade. Today, she stands tall as a passionate boilermaker at her family's successful welding business, Wright's Welding Operation, in the heart of the Australian outback. Initially, Skylar found it challenging entering the male-dominated world of welding. However, she soon found her feet and has become a trailblazer for other women in the industry.

Skylar started her career early by enrolling in a pre-apprenticeship course. She joined the TAFE at School program and completed a Certificate II in Engineering Pathways alongside her Year 12 studies.

After high school, Skylar began her apprenticeship at the TAFE Queensland Mount Isa campus. She was able to access free apprenticeships for under 21s and enrolled in a Certificate III in Engineering - Fabrication Trade Boilermaking and Welding.

Skylar's dedication to her training and her enthusiasm for encouraging more women to become boilermakers earned her a TAFE Queensland 2020 Mount Isa Trade Excellence Award; she was named the Female Trades Student of the Year.

Each day, Skylar draws on more than three generations of family inspiration to carry out fabrication works in the family business.

In 1993, Wright's Welding Operation was born in Mount Isa, Queensland. The town is situated 977km west of Townsville and has a strong mining history, after substantial lead discoveries were made in 1923. Today, Mount Isa is one of the world's top ten producers of lead, silver, zinc, and copper. Wright's Welding Operation fixes and maintains heavy earthmoving equipment, with a key focus on quality and addressing local needs.

Skylar is crucial to meeting the company's vision, as she draws on her skills and imagination to conceptualise, design, and build welded products in the company's workshop.

Skylar took time out to answer some questions about her welding career so far.

Describe your job.

In Wright's welding workshop there are two key areas. One area works with heavy fabrication projects, like rebuilding and repairing loader buckets, and dump truck trays. Meanwhile, our second area is for the lighter fabrication work like general repair jobs, or building steel and aluminium vehicle ute trays.

I mainly work in the second area, where my work focuses on building commercial steel ute trays for the local people of Mount Isa and surrounding areas, alongside differently designed trays for mining vehicles for our three local mining companies. I work with basic standard trays, and the more modified trays with canopies, toolboxes and other extras.

What inspired you to choose a career in welding?

Boilermaking is in my blood. My family has a highly successful business that has been running for nearly 30 years. My grandparents, uncle, mother, and a few other family members all work in the business.

I pursued work in the industry because it's something I always found interesting. Starting from when I was really young, and watching my grandfather building a boat or doing general repair works, I would grab a spare helmet and watch as he worked. I spent a lot of my school holidays at my



family's business, where I got to watch my family and the other workers do really interesting work, which left me feeling inspired.

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

This career is perfect for women who find themselves working better on the move and using their hands. Some people can't sit still to work at a desk job, and I think this is just one of the reasons women should definitely consider this job. It keeps both the mind and body active.

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

Never, ever give up. If a person has an interest or passion for the job, then let that push them to the best they can be. There are always going to be days when the work is too hard or hot, or even days where you will question why you want to continue in this profession. But I would advise people that you can do anything and that not every day is going to be like the last. Also, never let anyone tell you that you can't do anything just because you're a woman. Be confident in yourself and the work that you do. Lastly, don't be afraid to get your hands dirty!

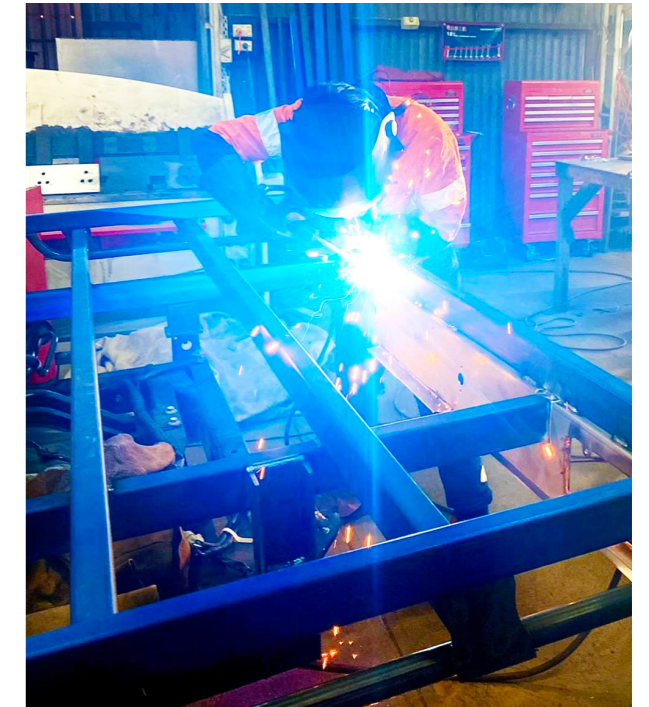
Have you found working in a traditionally male-dominated industry difficult?

At first, I certainly did. However, I was lucky enough to find myself in a working environment where most of the workers accepted me, saw my interest and love for the work. I was a 17-year-old girl that had just graduated from high school and there were a few male workers who thought I wasn't going to be able to handle the work, and even thought that I was kidding myself being there. This affected my confidence and self-esteem because I started thinking to myself that they must be right, because a woman in such a career was very rare.

Five years later, I look back and laugh because those people made me push myself to prove that I was more than capable at handling the work.

What is the most interesting project you've worked on?

A project I have worked on myself that I found both challenging and interesting was a complete rebuild on a tray built for a dump truck. We had to rebuild and install the walls and floor for the tray. I had to air-arc gouge all the old flooring and walls on the inside and outside of the tray, then grind out all the old built up mine dust and dirt from inside the tray. I then had to replace all the floor and walls with thicker steel and weld out the whole tray. After the tray got flipped over, I had to repair the cracks and damages on the outside of the tray. I found it interesting because there was so much involved in just one job.



Who has inspired you professionally?

The first person who comes to my mind would be my grandfather. He was 15 years old when he started his apprenticeship, but two years later, he was working on a vehicle that caught on fire and resulted in over 50% of his body being burnt. He spent 18 months in the hospital recovering from the injuries only to be told that he could never be a boilermaker again. In the 44 years since, he has not only recovered from his burns but also finished his apprenticeship, won awards for his work, and also opened a well-respected business that has been running for nearly 30 years.

Today, he is 63 years old and still works on the tools in the company. He has shown me what it really means to be in this profession.

What do you believe is the biggest challenge for the welding industry?

The biggest challenge we face is finding people who want to work in such hot and dirty conditions. Finding people who have the passion for the trade, and the drive to do the job correctly. Welding is not for everyone. It is hot, heavy and dirty. I have noticed less people wanting such a job, which is why it's challenging to find enough people to do the work.

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

The new technology that is rolling out across the industry provides such big opportunities. There are always new tools and machines being made and purchased for the industry to improve its work, in terms of the quality and speed of production.