Meet AWS’s 2019 Future Leaders

In 2019, the American Welding Society (AWS) initiated the Future Leaders Program, which aims to promote the involvement of early career members, including students, into AWS activities. Each year, the program will select two Future Leaders between the ages of 18 and 30 to serve a one-year term from January 1 to December 31. During this time, the Future Leaders will have the opportunity to participate in AWS board of directors meetings, attend FABTECH, contribute to important discussions that set policy, gain leadership skills, and network with industry leaders.

This year, Victoria Shekastehband and Mitchell Grams were chosen to serve as AWS Future Leaders.

“T was delighted with the high quality of the application packages for the inaugural class of Future Leaders. There were many outstanding packages, and selection of the final two choices was very difficult for the committee members,” explained AWS President Thomas Lienert. “We are very fortunate to have such exceptional candidates for the first Future Leaders group.”

The following profiles Future Leaders Victoria Shekastehband and Mitchell Grams.

Victoria Nahal Shekastehband

Victoria N. Shekastehband is a business management student at the University of South Carolina at Aiken, and holds an associate’s degree in welding technology from Aiken Technical College (ATC).

Shekastehband first became involved with welding, reluctantly, at age 16, when her mother “strongly suggested” she take welding classes as a high school elective. Despite her initial uncertainty, welding eventually became her favorite class.

“I enjoy being able to be creative and make something out of scrap that can be decorative or functional,” she explained. “Most people don’t have the skills to work with their hands such as welders do, and I think that’s something special about us.”

Shekastehband’s newfound passion for welding led her to help form the AWS Student Chapter at South Aiken High School. She credits her high school instructor, Oscar Rushton, for his encouragement.

Soon after, Shekastehband was featured in the 2015 Welding Journal for her part in the creation of a welded horse head made of horseshoes.

“That is what really sparked my interest in welding,” she affirmed.

During her time at ATC, Shekastehband became a member of the American Association of University Women and the Student Leadership Committee. She also took on roles as the college’s student ambassador and chair of the AWS Student Chapter. Her work with the chapter continues today.

“I’ve mainly stayed on to help with the transitions going on within the welding department,” she said. “I enjoy being able to meet the newer welders in the program and being able to give them advice on what classes to take and tips on how to weld.”

Additionally, Shekastehband has attended the AWS Leadership Symposium and the Camp Gravatt Leadership Retreat. She also interned with the nonprofit group Bahamas Methodist Habitat, where she spent her summer on the island of Eleuthera.

Her dedication has been recognized with various accolades, including the first annual Human and Civil Rights Student Champion Award, Student Service Award, and two DECA South Carolina State 1st Place Awards for Employee Acquisitions and Business Services Operations Research. She has also received many scholarships, including the AWS Welder Training Scholarship, the South Carolina LIFE Scholarship, and the American Association of University Women Endowment.

Currently, Shekastehband has two part-time jobs to help pay for school expenses. She is a supply chain intern at Savannah River Nuclear Solutions LLC, the management and operations contractor at the Department of Energy’s Savannah River Site, as well as a cashier at Sam’s Club.

She applied to the Future Leaders Program at the encouragement of Lee Kvidahl, AWS Past President, whom she met at the 2018 AWS Leadership Symposium.

“After looking into the program, I decided that it seemed to be an exciting opportunity for me,” she said.

As a Future Leader, she’s looking forward to returning to FABTECH, as well as meeting AWS Director-at-Large Debbie Doench.

Slated to graduate in 2021, Shekastehband is open to whatever the future holds.

Mitchell R. Grams

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Slated to graduate in 2021, Shekastehband is open to whatever the future holds.
I’m not exactly sure what I’m going to do after I graduate, but I do want to find a way to combine my welding and business education together,” she said.

**Mitchell R. Grams**

Mitchell R. Grams is a PhD candidate in the Department of Materials Engineering at the University of Alberta (UofA), Canada, where he also completed a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering in 2015 and ranked first out of 188 students.

Grams chose engineering as a career path because of his intellectual prowess in mathematics and physics. A lover of learning, he appreciates the field’s coupling of theoretical knowledge and hands-on skills.

“Whether its mathematical concepts, or practical skills such as welding, machining, or woodworking, I enjoy the opportunity for lifelong learning that a career in engineering encourages and, in many ways, requires,” he affirmed.

During his undergraduate studies, Grams interned with Milron Metal Fabrication as a computer numerical control punch operator. He was also an undergraduate research assistant with the Canadian Centre for Welding and Joining (CCWJ), focusing on welding torch instrumentation and position tracking. Exposed to welding for the first time at CCWJ, he saw first-hand how the craft can expand one’s options and knowledge base.

“The most important thing that this experience taught me is that welding research and welding in general is the gateway to a wide range of exciting opportunities,” he explained. “In only a few short months, I had the opportunity to apply my coursework and prior experience in 3D modelling, dynamics, and hands-on fabrication, while also gaining exposure to new concepts in electronics systems design and manufacturing.”

Grams’s other internships include two positions with Enbridge Inc., an energy transportation company, as an engineer in training and an engineering intern for pipeline integrity. He has also worked with Tesla, a company specializing in electric car manufacturing, as a materials engineering intern for welding.

Despite the heavy workload, Grams finds time to volunteer. He served as vice president of finance and vice president of internal affairs for UofA’s Mechanical Engineering Club. He has also served the university’s AWS Student Chapter as treasurer, vice chair, chair, and secretary, a position he currently holds. He has helped organize various events for the chapter, including hands-on welding demonstrations and a seminar for engineering students on the fundamentals of welding.

“These events have attracted more than 300 participants since their inception and have helped engineering students develop an appreciation for the importance and complexity of welding processes. This understanding plays a key role in driving better communication between engineers and welding practitioners in industry,” he said.

Grams’s additional activities include serving as a member of the International Institute of Welding’s (IIW’s) Task Group for Young Leaders; presenting at various national and international events, including the 2016 and 2017 Canadian Welding Association (CWA)/CanWeld Annual Meeting in Montreal, the 2016 and 2017 AWS/FABTECH Annual Meeting in Chicago, and the 2016 and 2017 IIW Annual Assembly in Australia and China; and attending the 2018 AWS Leadership Symposium.

Additionally, Grams has battled it out in various competitions. His team placed first in the consulting engineering category of both the 2015 Western Engineering Competition and the 2015 Canadian Engineering Competition.

He has earned multiple distinctions for his dedication and hard work, including the CWA Foundation UofA Student Award, Chevron Graduate Scholarship in Natural Gas Engineering, Queen Elizabeth II Graduate Scholarship, and Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council Alexander Graham Bell Canada Graduate Scholarship.

Grams applied to the Future Leaders Program to learn from the best and share his zeal for welding.

“Touched to apply to the Future Leaders Program because it presented a rare opportunity to work closely with these people who had an obvious enthusiasm and love for their work as advocates for the welding industry in North America,” he said. “Beyond that, I saw the Future Leaders Program as a chance to try and share my passion for the exciting work that welding has made possible for me, and maybe have the chance to inspire others in the same way that the AWS has inspired me.”

As a Future Leader, Grams hopes to work alongside the AWS Board of Directors, particularly Director at-Large Duane Miller, whom he met at a UofA seminar.

“The enthusiasm and charisma with which Dr. Miller presented an incredibly interesting but challenging topic to a wide-ranging audience was incredible to witness. I am humbled by the opportunity to learn directly from someone with Dr. Miller’s incredible welding knowledge and equally incredible ability to communicate his knowledge to others,” he said. “I personally feel that effective communication is one of the most important and often overlooked skills for engineers.”

His short-term plan for after graduation is working as a welding engineer in the manufacturing industry. More specifically, he would like to contribute to the implementation of new technologies, such as automation, within Alberta’s manufacturing industry.

His long-term goals involve welding engineering research at either an industrial or academic institution.

“Welding is one of the rare areas in which the esoteric results of fundamental research can have enormous and immediate practical impacts for industry,” he affirmed. “In work experience as an undergraduate student, I came to believe that future applications of mechanization and automation for welding and inspection demand a deeper knowledge of the underlying mechanics of welding than currently exist, and I hope to one day contribute to lessening this knowledge gap for the betterment of the welding industry.”

**To Learn More**

To gain more information about the AWS Future Leaders Program, visit [aws.org/future-leaders-program](http://aws.org/future-leaders-program). Also see the Welding Journal’s September 2018 Editorial on this topic, written by AWS President Thomas Lienert. [WJ](http://aws.org/future-leaders-program)