Meet AWS’s 2020 Future Leaders

The American Welding Society (AWS) Future Leaders Program aims to promote the involvement of early career members, including students, into AWS activities. Each year, the program selects 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 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, Hannah J. Wolf and Gabrielle R. Bettegnies were chosen to serve as AWS Future Leaders.

“AWS is very fortunate, again this year, to have two very well-qualified individuals like Hannah Wolf and Gabrielle Bettegnies as Future Leaders in 2020. We look forward to working with Hannah and Gabby,” affirmed AWS Past President Thomas Lienert.

The following profiles AWS Future Leaders Hannah J. Wolf and Gabrielle R. Bettegnies.

Hannah J. Wolf

Hannah J. Wolf is a full-time faculty and outreach specialist for the trades at Madison Area Technical College (MATC), Madison, Wis., where she has worked since 2015. Her job consists of teaching 2D and 3D computer-aided design (CAD) classes as well as basic welding and machining. She also plans events, including welding summer programs for K–12 students, and visits schools and community groups to inform others about trade careers.

“Working with students is by far my favorite part of my job . . . and getting them from the fearful first sparks all the way until the end of the semester when I have to nearly chase them out of the booth,” she said. “It brings a smile to my face every time, knowing that they have learned a valuable skill that will benefit them always.”

Wolf appreciates welding for many reasons, but mostly for the variety and “functional creativity” it offers her.

“I love knowing that my skills can be applied to everything from structural steel to jewelry making,” she said. “Welding crosses so many disciplines that there is always a new and exciting project to work on.”

Despite her admiration for the craft, Wolf didn’t originally set out for a career in welding. Having grown up around uncles who used welding to repair items around the farm, she was exposed to the craft from a young age, but it wasn’t until she was 24 years old that she considered welding as a viable career option. Wolf’s initial plans involved a career in psychology, and in 2013 she earned a bachelor of arts in psychology with a specialization in addition from the University of Minnesota (UMN) Twin Cities, Minneapolis, Minn.

While working toward her bachelor’s degree, Wolf took on several education-related jobs. She was a UMN teaching assistant; a scuba instructor; and a private tutor for kindergarten to third grade students, as well as inmates, parolees, and probationers.

Despite her varied experience, after graduating from college, Wolf experienced difficulty in landing a job in her field of study. Faced with the choice of spending more money for additional education in psychology, Wolf decided to take a different route.

“I am very proud to have completed a bachelor’s degree; however, just because you can get a degree in something does not mean that there is demand for those skills in the job market. This is the trouble I ran into when I graduated from college; I had a degree that was only really designed to get me into a master’s program. The numbers did not line up between the cost of more schooling and my future salary,” she explained. “I decided it was time to go back to school but for something that I knew would be a marketable skill and had a strong job outlook. I chose welding because it was a short program and had a lot of options for employment after graduation. I couldn’t be happier with my choice.”

Some years later, Wolf earned a technical diploma in welding and metal fabrication from MATC, an OSHA 10 certification, and a Class A commercial driver’s license on manual transmission with air brakes. She also amassed field experience. In 2015, she worked as an ironworker for the Iron Workers Local 383. From 2015 to 2017, she was a welder and finisher with Service Welding, where she worked in tandem with a robotic welding machine, used jigs and fixtures to fit and tack weldments, polished and ground products, and performed quality-control checks before delivery.
Additionally, Wolf became an AWS member in 2015. As a student, she served the AWS MATC Student Chapter as treasurer. She currently serves the AWS Madison-Beloit Section as membership chair. She was also selected by her Section to attend the 2019 Leadership Symposium at AWS World Headquarters, Miami, Fla.

Looking to the future, Wolf hopes to continue teaching. This love of educating others was the impetus for her applying to become an AWS Future Leader. In her new role, she hopes to positively influence the industry’s up-and-comers.

“We cannot expect things to change unless you are willing to take action. I was fortunate enough to be selected to attend the Leadership Symposium in Miami this past summer, and so many of the struggles brought forth there were regarding membership and retaining young members. As one of those young members, I thought that my voice and ideas would be a valuable asset to the AWS board, especially because welding was not what I had originally set out to do, but something I fell in love with later on,” she affirmed. “I look forward to giving a voice and a platform to the ideas of other young people looking to find a voice and a platform to the ideas of others using.”

Throughout high school, Bettegnies continued to perfect her welding skills while becoming more involved in the welding industry, which included competing in welding competitions and becoming an AWS member in 2013. She also gained a specialization in stainless steel gas tungsten arc welding (GTAW).

In 2015, Bettegnies entered Indiana University–Purdue University, where she held a job as a teacher’s assistant for the engineering department from 2017 to 2019. During this time, she also completed several internships with her current employer, System Technologies Inc., as a design engineer, a welder and fabricator, and a mechanical design engineer. Some of her tasks included designing a system to clean and prep Toyota parts; performing custom stainless GTAW as well as mild and stainless steel GMAW; installing conveyor systems and duct work; and utilizing CAD software to design custom industrial equipment.

Bettegnies also took on more responsibilities for the AWS Indiana Section, where she has been treasurer since 2018. Some of her tasks include helping with planning monthly meetings, tracking attendance, and organizing annual welding contests, such as SkillsUSA, Future Farmers of America, Professional Welding Contest, and Midwest Welding Contest.

The Section’s youngest member by almost two decades, Bettegnies was puzzled by the Section’s overall lack of attendance at meetings, as well as the lack of people her age. To figure it out, Bettegnies called and invited 621 members to a Section meeting, but only 14 new members came. The experience motivated her to apply to be a Future Leader, with the hope of better serving her Section.

“I haven’t pinpointed why this issue is happening, but I plan to use my experiences from this new leadership opportunity to find out how to help our issue. As a Future Leader, I want to try to better our Section as a whole,” she said. “I’d also like to discover how other sections have more involvement, and what we can do as a Section to improve. A few others and I have implemented better organization techniques with our Section (note taking, attendance keeping, subcommittees, welding contests, etc.), but there is always something new or something more to take away from any other ideas others use.”

When asked what motivates her to dedicate her time to helping her Section, she said, “the people.”

“I have never met a group of people so determined to help others with providing information, knowledge, or wisdom (and not just with welding). They want to pass on their experiences and knowledge so that it can be used to better your future endeavors,” she explained. “The passion most of these people express with welding is something I can relate to, and it keeps me connected with them. We all have something in common and we all have a select bit of knowledge we can share with each other. I never am not learning when I am around them!”

In 2019, Bettegnies graduated with a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering technology, along with a green belt certification in Lean Six Sigma. Looking back, she credits her current success to welding, as well as those who have encouraged her.

“I wouldn’t be where I am without welding as my foundation, and I thank my welding instructor Rick Ferguson for encouraging me to be better and do better,” she said.

In the future, Bettegnies hopes to become an AWS Certified Welding Inspector. She also plans to transform her garage into a welding shop so that she may take on side jobs.

“I want nothing more than to be able to weld on a regular, everyday basis because it is something I am passionate about,” she affirmed.

To Learn More

To gain more information about the AWS Future Leaders Program, visit aws.org/future-leaders-program.