SOCIETY NEWS

AWS Member Profile

Nina Choy

Nina Choy’s initial life plan didn’t involve being an engineer. Armed with a bachelor’s in civil engineering from Colorado State, she joined the U.S. Air Force hoping to branch into law enforcement. “I didn’t think I wanted to be an engineer,” she said. “But they said, ‘You don’t get to pick. You have an engineering degree, so you’ll be an engineer.’”

Looking back, Choy is thankful the military didn’t give her an option. “I was exposed to the practical aspects of engineering, so I got to do hands-on work with our heavy-equipment operators, carpenters, and welders,” she explained. “I really liked being out in the shop and on the field. It showed me a side of engineering I wasn’t aware of when I was in school.”

After finishing her stint in the Air Force, Choy began working as a materials engineer for the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), where she focused on steel fabrication issues and project management. She also became an AWS Certified Welding Inspector.

Ten years later, Choy is still with Caltrans, but today she performs quality management for the structures design division. Because of her diverse industry experience, Choy is able to help bridge knowledge gaps.

“A lot of engineers don’t have a familiarity with steel fabrication and welding, so it’s nice to facilitate that conversation so they understand what’s going on in the shop,” she said.

As an engineer, Choy has worked on several skyscraping projects, such as the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Gerald Desmond Bridge in Long Beach.

“Regardless of whether you’re an engineer, an inspector, or a welder, you can point at a project like that and proudly say, ‘I worked on that,’” she said. “We’re so lucky in this type of industry because our achievements and hard work impacts so many people.”

Choy is also vice chair of the AASHTO/AWS D1J Subcommittee on Bridge Welding and a member of the D1 Task Group 7 on Tubulars.

“It’s exciting because you are surrounded by knowledgeable people from different sectors in the industry, so there’s a lot of cross communication and learning from one another,” she explained. “It’s also an opportunity to change the industry and bring new innovations into the code so that others may use it.”

Despite her engineering prowess today, Choy describes her younger self as being “a horrible student” because she needed extra help in her shop classes. “If my shop teacher could see where I am today, he would be very surprised.”

AWS Educator Member Profile

Aleasha Hladilek

Aleasha Hladilek’s route to welding wasn’t a linear one. After earning a bachelor’s degree in anthropology, she set her sails toward the trades and enrolled in an automotive program at Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College (WITC). The decision unveiled a propensity for welding.

“After graduating and working in the field for a year, I decided to go back to school for welding because I had gained some experience gas metal arc welding [GMAW] exhaust systems and found I really enjoyed welding,” she said. “Also, the welding jobs I was hearing about paid better.”

Hladilek graduated from a yearlong welding program and worked in the mines, where she performed shielded metal arc welding (SMAW) with the Millwright Union. The experience allowed her to land a full-time job performing gas tungsten arc welding (GTAW) for the aerospace industry.

During this time, she also discovered a knack for teaching while working part-time for welding and automotive technical college programs. The experience inspired her to earn a master’s degree in career and technical education.

“My part-time teaching job became my full-time job, and I’ve continued to work part-time and summers in the welding industry both as a welder fabricator and as a welding inspector after passing my AWS Certified Welding Inspector and Educator exams,” she said. With ten years of teaching experience in her professional tool box, Hladilek currently works as a welding instructor and program director for WITC.

She teaches the one-year accelerated technical welding program, which provides students with a ready-to-work technical diploma.

“It’s rewarding to be a part of students developing the skills and confidence to find a life-changing, rewarding career after their graduation,” she said.

Hladilek also teaches oxyfuel and plasma cutting; basic and advanced GMAW, GTAW, SMAW, and flux cored arc welding (FCAW); blueprint reading for welders; and fabrication.

Her students make sauna stoves, trailers, and tables to raise funds for jackets and class trips. This year, her students will be building archways to aid the college’s remodeling efforts.

Hladilek is also working to set up her own complete welding and fabrication shop at home.

“I enjoy working on all sorts of new and challenging side projects in my free time,” she said. “From boats to experimental airplanes, artistic railings to signage for local businesses.”