



KEREN PATERSON

There's no easy path to success in the mining industry, but Trigg Mining managing director **KEREN PATERSON has met every challenge head on.**

Defying the prevailing stereotypes of the early 90s, she made her way as a mining engineer by studying at the WA School of Mines, and two decades on, a pioneering spirit has put her in the running to become one of Australia's first potash producers. Keren offers her own insight about being successful in mining and the excitement of establishing a new resources company.

Q Keren, what first inspired you to get involved in the mining industry and study at WASM? Do you have any advice for today's students based on the experience gained in the course of your career?

I was initially interested in a career in civil engineering and did work experience with Clough in year 10, but I didn't find the experience very inspiring. A conversation with an uncle led me participate in the Chamber of Minerals and Energy Focus on Mining Seminar a year

later. I enjoyed the trip to Kalgoorlie so much I was determined to return to study Mining Engineering at WASM and I'm so glad I did.

What initially attracted me to mining was its tangibility – you can see the impact of your work on a daily basis. I was also fascinated with the diverse subjects that can make up a mining engineering degree and excited by the opportunity to live and work in the bush.

My advice to students is to be curious and open to opportunities, even if they don't seem to be a logical next step. My career to date has been enriched by the diverse roles I've had and especially by those where I stepped well out of my comfort zone.

I also think the process of becoming a mining engineer through the WA School of Mines enables us to develop leadership skills that are applicable in any work place. The vacation work and mandatory on-

the-job experience required for the statutory certificates for managers ensures we become practical and innovative leaders very early on in our careers. Many of our alumni were in senior leadership positions in their twenties, which seems quite normal in mining, but in the broader workforce it is really quite unusual.

Q You started your own career in the early 90s, when there was less encouragement for women to join male-dominated industries. The mining industry in particular had a reputation for a significant lack of gender diversity: What sort of challenges did that present?

Things have changed a lot in my time. At my first induction at an underground mine, the instructor, sat on my desk, leaned over and said to myself and a fellow female engineer "ladies, if you need to move your typewriters, just get one of the lads to do it." Little did he know that I would be on an airliner a few weeks later.

There is still a lack of diversity (not just gender), but a lot has changed. On a recent flight to a large gold mine in WA, I was really encouraged to see just how many women were on that flight.

Q So you were determined to buck the trend?

I think that was a part of it. I'm quite motivated by challenge and I naturally question the status quo.

I started out initially following a traditional career path for a Mining Engineer. I moved quickly through the operational roles in underground and open pit mining to become a Mine Manager, but after being awarded the Telstra Young Business Woman of the Year and completing an MBA (Master of Business Administration), my career expanded into areas I never knew existed when I first chose to be an engineer. I think my constant curiosity and thirst for challenge has led me to take on some really interesting roles including leading an international company takeover and taking a uranium exploration company to IPO.

Q It sounds like you've met a lot of challenges head on, have you had any career setbacks?

Yes, the most significant one was when I was shuffled sideways because the new General Manager didn't think a woman should be an underground production engineer and it would be more appropriate for me to be in an open pit planning role. I'd dealt with sexual harassment and bullying before, but this event really set me back on a personal level. So, I still delivered on the feasibility and started the pit, but sold my house, bought a Kombi and travelled Europe, planning to come back to Australia with an entirely different career choice.

Fortunately, I visited a fellow mining engineer in Ireland who took me underground and I knew right away that mining was in my DNA and I was coming back.

So, it's certainly not been all 'beer and skittles' although there is always fun to be had. It's been about being resilient and determined, but on the flip side it has been incredibly rewarding with opportunities to travel, work with some amazing people and work in places I would never have dreamt of when growing up. The motto on my plaque at the WASM Social Club bar reads, "Have the courage to back yourself." And I remind myself of that every year when back in Kalgoorlie for Diggers and Dealers.

Q You certainly have done that: Mid 2017 you started Trigg Mining to explore and develop sulphate of potash (SOP), which is a new industry here in Australia. It must be a thrill to have recently completed the first drilling program at Lake Rason?

It certainly is, the last six months have been very exciting. We've negotiated an agreement to earn 100% of more than 2,500km² of prospective tenements near Laverton in Western Australia, raised \$1.8 million in seed funding and completed our first drilling program at the Laverton Links Project.

It's been an incredible opportunity to deliver on a long-held dream to start a company from scratch and I feel very fortunate to have assembled an awesome team who are all working very hard to make Trigg Mining a success. We're now working towards the company's IPO and listing on the ASX in 2018.

Q What was the attraction to your current potash play?

One of my reasons for entering the mining industry was seeing the legacy environmental issues first hand whilst camping with my family and wanting to do it better. What I like about sulphate of potash is that it's dissolved in salty brine water, which means it has a minimal impact on the landscape as there's no open pit, underground or even a waste dump to rehabilitate. We also harvest solar energy in the production method to evaporate the brine water and produce the sulphate of potash and other mineral salts.

As a commodity, potash is becoming more and more important. It is one of the key ingredients in fertiliser, whether that's for large scale farming, or growing the veggies in your backyard, we need fertiliser to be able to feed the world's population. As the world's arable land declines and the population continues to grow, SOP will continue to be a very important commodity for ensuring global food security. ■