



Finding Her Voice: Women in Steel Conference Recap

by Emily Williams





AIST's inaugural Women in Steel Conference was held 17–19 September 2023 in Pittsburgh, Pa., USA, at the Westin Pittsburgh Hotel. Over a day and a half, attendees heard from women in varying positions within the steel industry and shared their experiences in a male-dominated field.

The energy was electric at the welcome reception Sunday evening, and attendees were ready to get the conference started.

"I'm most looking forward to just meeting all of the wonderful people here and trying to learn as much from them [as possible] and to be inspired by them as I continue along my path toward being a young professional in the steel industry," said student Sarah Cushnie, from McMaster University.

Monday morning started with a welcome and opening remarks to the sold-out crowd of 270 from Stacy Varmecky, general manager — sales and marketing at AIST. Varmecky shared insights on the evolution of AIST's Women in Steel initiative, which began in 2018. In the years since, AIST has doubled its female membership. In addition, she shared data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showing that in 2022, 56.8% of the total workforce was female, but only 12% of the iron and steel industry workforce is female. She stated there is plenty of opportunity to expand our workforce in this category.

She concluded by saying, "We are truly grateful for the support the industry has shown for this conference. We will continue to learn about the needs from our industry and evolve AIST's offerings to provide a better support system for all companies and employees placing an emphasis on this subject."

Before the first session, there was a heartfelt video tribute to a true pillar of the steel industry, MaryEmily Slate, former executive vice president of Commercial, Nucor Corp., who sadly passed away earlier this year. Friends, family and coworkers shared the influence she had on not only their careers, but their lives and the steel industry as a whole.

"Do you want to be right, or do you want to be effective?"



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With a reminder of how impactful one’s life and career can be on others, attendees listened to an interview with Brenda Petrilena, director, global decarbonization and program management, United States Steel Corporation, given by Karin Lund, chief executive officer, G-Power Global Enterprises LLC.

The attendees learned about Petrilena’s career path and the trajectory of her life as a woman in male-dominated fields. Not only was she one of the few women in her engineering program in school, but she then was a minority in her first jobs out of college at Westinghouse and Ford.

She offered many insights to her mindset and how she has grown and uplifted others in her career by having a mentor, advocating not just for herself, but others in similar positions, and being an advocate for fellow women and other minorities in the workplace.

The interview concluded with Petrilena sharing the best piece of feedback she’s been given so far in her career: “Do you want to be right, or do you want to be effective?”

The remainder of the first day was filled with panel discussions including topics about creating more inclusive work cultures and how women are integral to the workforce, the importance of a work/life balance, and women in C-suite-level leadership positions.

During a panel discussion titled “If You Build It, She Will Come,” panelist Amy Fisher, material handling manager, Nucor Steel Tuscaloosa Inc., said, “Don’t feel like where you started your career is where it ends,” encouraging attendees to go after the career they really want and to not settle for something they feel is the safest option.

“Pay Attention to the Group in the Middle” was the second panel and featured a group of women in the middle of their careers. These women provided insight on navigating transitions in life while still trying to excel in the workplace, the importance of surrounding yourself with a supportive team, and how to overcome career development obstacles.

The last panel discussion, consisting of female executives, included conversations about imposter syndrome, the benefits of having women in leadership roles, and the barriers women can face being in those positions.

One of those barriers the panelists discussed was the unconscious bias women face in the workplace and how that directly affects how women are perceived and treated in a work environment. It was also mentioned that women in leadership roles is key to change, and with every advancement a woman makes, it opens the door for another woman.

The first day was finished out by Karin Lund, where she briefly presented “Everyday Acts of Inclusion — Making a Difference.” She discussed how small changes and conscious efforts of inclusion during someone’s day can have a huge impact on how everyone can benefit from a workplace that is willing to make those changes.

Monday closed with a reception for all attendees where everyone had the chance to network. Conference attendees were palpably excited about the Women in Steel Conference and couldn’t wait for more.

“It’s empowering to hear different people’s stories and the struggles that they’ve had in a male-dominated industry and how far we’re coming, but we have a lot of room to grow still,” said Ashley McMahon, SMS group Inc.

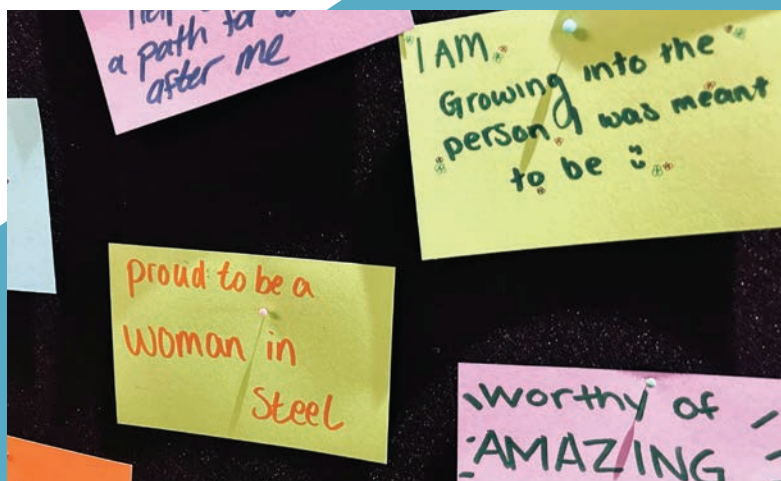
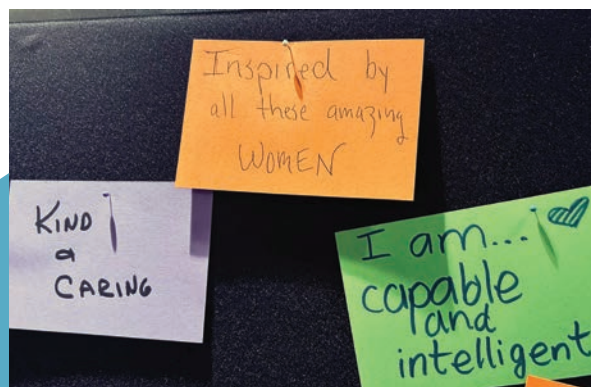
The last day of the conference started with a presentation by Liz Nesvold, president, Cresset, titled “Empowering Women: Small Steps to Achieve

Big Careers.” She told attendees — who were majority women — to speak up, because their voice matters, to not be afraid to communicate their value and, most importantly, to be resilient.

She shared some startling statistics as well. Women are two times more likely to be mistaken for someone more junior than men are in a work environment. Additionally, 37% of women leaders have had a coworker get credit for their work compared to 26% of men leaders.

The resounding message from many of the speakers throughout the conference was to not only have the confidence to advocate for themselves and what they want out of their career, but also to have the resilience to keep going after it.

Kerry Siggins, chief executive officer, StoneAge Inc., moved attendees with her presentation about her life and career where she discussed personal struggles when she was in her twenties, how she persevered and built the life she has now.



Siggins shared that not only did she learn from her past experiences, but she grew from them. She discussed how she got to her position of chief executive officer in her late twenties and what she did to become a more effective leader. She remarked: “The only way to get good at doing things is to do hard things.”

The conference concluded with a final presentation from Ana Kraft, founder and chief executive officer, Xena Workwear, where she explained the beginnings of Xena. She noticed the glaring gaps in personal protective equipment (PPE) for men in a steel mill versus women. Women traditionally must wear the PPE that is available, which is sized for men, and has the potential to be a safety hazard while walking through the mill. Seeing the gap of women’s PPE, she decided to take matters into her own hands and start her own brand.

She showed some of the PPE options they have at Xena such as steel-toed boots, high-visibility vests and utility blazers with deep pockets, and explained

how they are specifically tailored for women entering a steel mill.

Kraft completed her presentation by sharing some of her own goals and how she is always pushing herself out of her comfort zone and encouraged others to do the same.

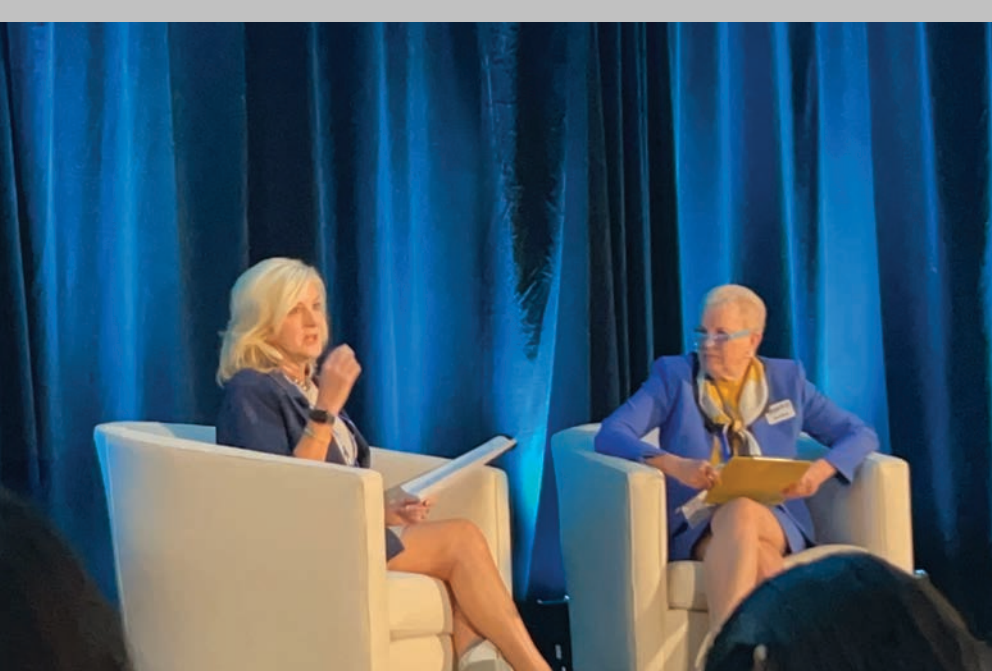
The inaugural Women in Steel conference left attendees with a sense of excitement and a wealth of new ideas to take back to their offices, as well as gratitude to have had a space to hear other women’s experiences in the industry.

“The steel industry has been such a big part of my professional career and professional growth, so seeing this event being formed over the years and now being able to be a part of it is so monumental and I hope it will impact people and I hope to be able to contribute to it moving forward,” said Rachel Schmidt, technical sales manager, Berry Metal.

AIST will hold its 2nd Women in Steel Conference in the fall of 2024. Details are currently being finalized and will be released to the membership once available.

AIST thanks premier event sponsor, Steel Dynamics Inc., event sponsors Vesuvius, Hatch and Nucor Corp., as well as all of the other sponsors for their contributions and support. ♦





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Event Contributors

