



Women in Steel:

Progress & Perspectives



Jodi Parnell

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Where did your education and career start?

I graduated from the University of Alabama (Roll Tide!) with a degree in marketing. While I would love to tell you marketing was my grand plan and I evolved from there, I honestly just majored in it because I had a sibling that did, and it seemed like the thing to do at the time. The job market when I was in school was extremely tough, and I was looking for a versatile major that would result in a job.

Why did you choose the steel industry?

I didn't choose the steel industry, the steel industry chose me, I guess you could say. As I mentioned, the job market was in a transition at the time with companies facing a wave of Baby Boomers about to retire, but lackluster profits to hire new talent. A local steel mill, Tuscaloosa Steel (now Nucor Steel Tuscaloosa), was hiring an inside sales representative, and I

was the only candidate that applied for the job. I started the job, did 12 weeks of training out in the steel mill, hit the desk, and never considered leaving the steel industry even once over the next 27 years.

Tell us about how you have advanced in your career.

I found my way to O'Neal Steel less than 2 years into my career as an entry-level buyer in purchasing. Shortly after I started, the company was staring down the barrel of Y2K and a new enterprise resource planning implementation, and I was fortunate enough to be heavily involved in that project. The next 20 years I grew within the purchasing and supply chain management realm, with a linear path upward in the company. I know that is not the case for most, but up until just the past few years my career was 100% purchasing-related up to and including vice president of supply chain management (2012–2022), chief operating officer (2022–2024), and then my recent promotion to president and CEO in January of this year.

Can you talk about support you've received to advance your career? (i.e. mentors, etc.)

I always love this question. I would have told you years ago that I did not have any mentors, and I laugh now when I think that. I definitely had advocates, and a large group of people that wanted to see me succeed, and that gave me plenty of opportunities to fail — while giving me the support to solve my own failures. My predecessor in supply chain management taught me to constantly challenge my thoughts. I thought he just wanted to argue with me, but he loved challenging me to think through things more completely and differently. I had another advocate that made sure that I was always in the conversations when facing a hard problem — so that I could learn. And the O'Neal family has supported me, pushed me and believed in me my entire career. I believe that if you work for the right company, you don't have one mentor, you have an entire safety

net of them. Mentors, to me, are not always meant to be friends — instead, they are those that push you the hardest and frustrate you the most. And sometimes that means they are not formal “coffee-chat” mentors.

Why do you feel diversity and inclusivity are important in the workplace, and the steel industry as a whole?

Diversity and inclusivity are more than the typical definition. I intentionally surround myself with people as different from me as possible, because in a team of people who think in completely different ways, the “right” solution is easier to see. This applies to financial backgrounds, education levels, personality styles, race, gender — all the differences that make us who we are. Respecting each other in all our differences allows us to find solutions that hold water in all circumstances.

What has been the best thing about being a woman in this industry?

Our industry is full of great people. Great men, great women — simply great people. I have grown up with so many of them, and now I am seeing a new generation of great people coming in. There are so many opportunities

for young people in our industry these days. I love seeing so many young women entering the industry, and I hope that they look and see that there is nothing holding them back to achieving their professional goals. Our O’Neal Steel Executive Team has a female CEO and CFO (50% of our team) — that is pretty cool.

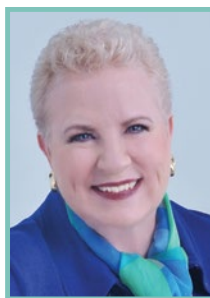
Do you have any professional development book recommendations that you’d like to share?

Anything that teaches you about yourself and how you can interact with others better is good, but I typically suggest that instead of focusing on that next professional development book — get out and talk to people. And not the people that have climbed the chain — talk to the people who find a way to get things done, regardless of their role within the company. Every organization has those people that is just the person that can get others to do things — study them. That is the key to professional development: influencing and persuading others without authority and building credibility and trust. And don’t be afraid to just read for fun — it is okay to let the creativity of a good fiction novel poke at another side of your brain every now and again. ♦

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