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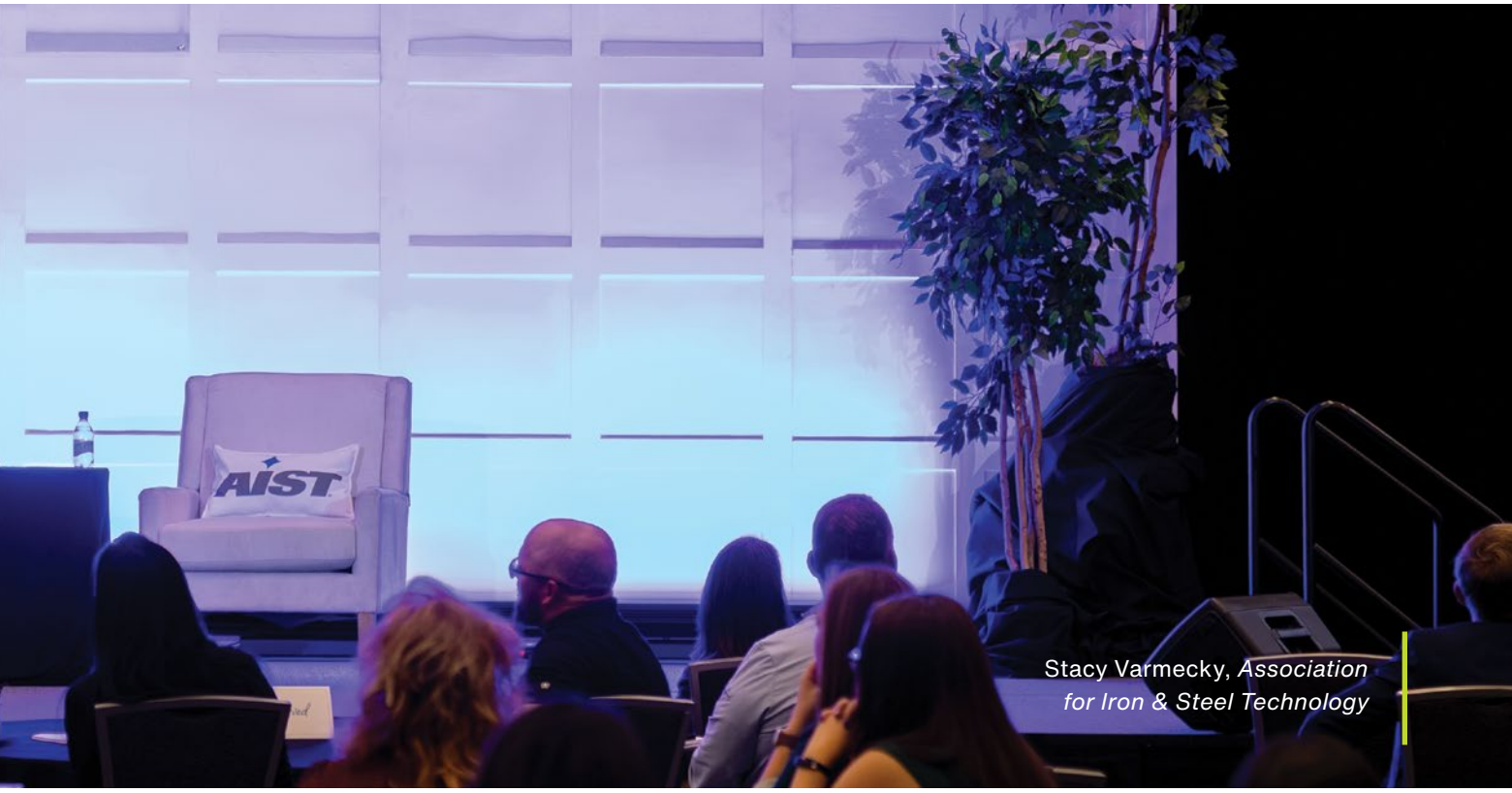
2026 Women in Steel Conference Recap

by Jill Liberto

The fourth annual AIST Women in Steel Conference brought together 451 attendees and 17 exhibiting companies for three days of technical discussions, professional development and networking, 21–23 September 2026, at the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland in Cleveland, Ohio, USA. From the challenges of executing major steelmaking projects to navigating global trade policies and building careers in a traditionally male-dominated industry, the conference highlighted the expertise, experiences and leadership of women helping shape steel's future.



Stacy Varmecky, *Association for Iron & Steel Technology*

The conference opened Monday, 21 September, with small-group professional development workshops that encouraged attendees to examine how they communicate, collaborate and lead. Val Grubb, president of Val Grubb & Associates Ltd., explored strategies for influencing others without formal authority. Patricia Fripp, presentation skills expert, Fripp Virtual Training, shared techniques for communicating with confidence, while Judy Ferraro, president of Judy Ferraro & Associates Inc., focused on the importance of intentional listening.

All three speakers would return to address the full conference audience, but Monday's smaller sessions offered opportunities for more focused learning and discussion. The day concluded with a welcome reception, including a special gathering for first-time attendees, where new connections began to take shape.

Tuesday's program opened with Stacy Varmecky, general manager — operations, AIST, reflecting on the progress of the Women in Steel initiative since the inaugural conference in 2023. Female representation within AIST's membership has grown from 9.9% in 2023 to 13.7% in 2026, an encouraging sign of increasing engagement.

Varmecky emphasized, however, that attracting women to the industry is only part of the challenge: Retaining talent, creating opportunities for advancement and developing future leaders are equally important. She distinguished between mentors, who provide guidance and advice, and sponsors, who actively advocate for individuals and help create opportunities for advancement. Varmecky encouraged attendees to pursue challenging assignments, communicate their ambitions and take on leadership roles within AIST, including through Technology Committees and Member Chapters.

The conference then recognized Carolee Vanicek, vice president – manufacturing special projects, Metallus, as the recipient of the 2026 MaryEmily Slate Trailblazer Award for Women in Steel. The award recognizes women whose professional achievements, leadership and commitment to advancing opportunities for others have made a significant impact on the steel industry.



Carolee Vanicek,
Metallus

> “Keep investing in yourself”

During an interview with Varmecky, Vanicek reflected on a career spanning more than 30 years, from her early work as a process improvement engineer to leadership roles in finishing, continuous casting, meltshop operations and commercial product management.

Her experiences reinforced the value of spending time where steel is made. Listening to operators and maintenance personnel, understanding their challenges and following through on commitments helped her build credibility. As her career progressed, Vanicek discovered that effective leadership increasingly meant empowering others rather than personally solving every problem.





"Keep investing in yourself," she advised, encouraging younger professionals to embrace unfamiliar assignments and continue learning.

That message carried into "Accelerating Action — Advocating for Yourself and Leading Forward," a panel discussion moderated by Jen Kalin, regional director of facilities, Osborn Engineering Inc.

For panelist Brandy Heath, continuous improvement operations excellence manager, CMC Steel Alabama, advocating for herself became particularly important after discovering that management had considered her for a position but decided against offering it. The assumption was that, as a single mother, she would not want the additional responsibilities. No one had asked her.

"Never leave your ambitions to someone else's assumptions," Heath advised. Her experience underscored the importance of communicating career goals rather than allowing others to define them.

Katie Martin-Dobrowolski, section manager operations, Cleveland-Cliffs Cleveland Works LLC, discussed deliberately moving from quality into operating supervision to expand her experience in steel-producing operations. Joanna "JoJo" Clark, meltshop manager, Nucor Steel–Hertford County, emphasized the value of connecting technical improvements to production performance and financial results when seeking management support.



Brandy Heath,
CMC Steel Alabama







(L–R): Nicole Altman, *Hatch;* Joanna "JoJo" Clark, *Nucor Steel–Hertford County;* Laura Devoni, *Algoma Steel Inc.;* Brandy Heath, *CMC Steel Alabama;* Katie Martin-Dobrowolski, *Cleveland-Cliffs Cleveland Works LLC;* Mindy Toth, *Race Winning Brands;* Jen Kalin, *Osborn Engineering Inc.*

Laura Devoni, vice president of human resources and corporate affairs, Algoma Steel Inc., encouraged attendees to understand the economics of steelmaking and pursue difficult assignments. Nicole Altman, process engineer, Hatch, and Mindy Toth, chief human resources officer, Race Winning Brands, offered additional perspectives on professional relationships, advocacy and communicating confidently.

Although their career paths differed, the panelists shared a common message: Advancement requires preparation, initiative and a willingness to make professional ambitions known.

Tuesday afternoon continued with presentations by Grubb and Fripp for the full conference audience, building on their Monday workshops with strategies for influencing colleagues and communicating ideas effectively.

The discussion then broadened from individual careers to the global forces affecting steel producers. During "Steel in Transition: How Trade Policy and Carbon Regulation Are Reshaping Global Markets," Marie-Luise Meyer, partner, senior consulting team, Boston Consulting Group, examined how trade restrictions and carbon regulations are changing the competitive landscape.







Val Grubb, *Val Grubb & Associates Ltd.*

Meyer compared the United States' increasing use of tariffs, including measures affecting steel-containing products, with the European Union's approach of tightening import quotas while introducing carbon-related requirements. These developments are influencing international trade flows, production decisions and investment strategies.

She also explored the implications for low-carbon steelmaking, including direct reduced iron (DRI) and electric arc furnace (EAF) projects. As producers evaluate new technologies and changing market conditions, investment decisions must account for both regulatory requirements and competitive pressures.

Meyer connected these challenges to the need for adaptable, diverse leadership, emphasizing that navigating the industry's transition will require not only technological innovation but also people capable of leading organizations through uncertainty.







Maria Carolina "Carol" Campos, *Vesuvius USA*

Wednesday's program shifted the focus to the realities of implementing technical improvements. During "From Concept to Completion: Real-World Technical Leadership in Steel," moderated by Michelle Klein, director of project controls, Stevens Engineers & Constructors, panelists shared projects that tested their engineering knowledge, problem-solving abilities and leadership skills.

Maria Carolina "Carol" Campos, director of fluxes and CTM – global marketing, Vesuvius USA, discussed developing a low-fluorine mold flux for continuous casting. Reducing fluorine content while maintaining the lubrication, viscosity and heat transfer characteristics required for reliable casting operations presented a significant technical challenge.

Laboratory development was only the beginning. Industrial trials required careful evaluation, collaboration with operating personnel and confidence that the new formulation could perform under production conditions.

"The technical expertise opened the door, but the implementation required a lot of trust," Campos explained. Her experience demonstrated that even a technically sound innovation depends on the people responsible for putting it into practice.

Mary Frankovich, project manager, Stevens Engineers & Constructors, described a modernization project at Burns Harbor, Ind., USA, involving approximately US$65 million in capital investment. Installing major plate-processing equipment within an operating facility required coordinating oversized equipment transportation, heavy lifts, restricted access and multiple contractors.

The project's complexity reinforced the importance of detailed planning and being physically present to understand construction conditions and resolve issues.

"You've got to be boots on the ground if you're going to get credibility and transparency with the people that you're working with," Frankovich said.

Stephanie Mikulski, program manager engineering, Cleveland-Cliffs Inc., shared lessons from two laser-welder modernization projects at Rockport Works. The first installation faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including limitations on equipment testing and vendor support.

Rather than allowing those difficulties to define the next project, her team applied what it had learned. More extensive factory acceptance testing, earlier involvement of operations and maintenance personnel, improved vendor coordination, and three-dimensional scanning helped anticipate problems before installation.

One particularly practical improvement resulted from listening to an operator with color vision limitations. His feedback prompted changes to equipment display colors, demonstrating how seemingly small details can affect usability and performance.

"You don't have to be the expert if you are leading the team," Mikulski advised. Successful project leadership, she emphasized, involves bringing together people with different expertise and creating an environment where their contributions are valued.

"You've got to be boots on the ground if you're going to get credibility and transparency with the people that you're working with"



Mary Frankovich, *Stevens Engineers & Constructors*



Allison Howard,
Cleveland Sirens,
Rock Entertainment Group

Wednesday's program continued with Rona Smeak's, associate professor, Slippery Rock University, presentation on the multigenerational workplace and a keynote by Allison Howard, president of business operations, Cleveland Sirens, and chief commercial officer, Rock Entertainment Group. Drawing on her background in engineering and leadership positions in professional sports, Howard discussed preparation, calculated risk-taking and building teams that benefit from different perspectives.

The afternoon's industry panel, "Breaking the Mold: Young Women Shaping Steel's Future," brought the conversation to professionals at an earlier stage of their careers. Moderated by Rachel Schmidt, technical sales manager – EAF mill services, Berry Metal Co., the discussion explored experiences in maintenance, metallurgy, quality assurance and environmental management.

Megan Bouklias, maintenance engineer I, Metallus Inc., described the importance of learning from experienced maintenance personnel and operators. Engineering education provided a foundation, but understanding equipment and solving problems required time in the plant.

She also recalled working with a vendor who repeatedly directed questions about her project to a male mentor rather than to her. The experience illustrated a challenge familiar to many women entering technical fields: establishing credibility when others make assumptions about their expertise.

For Jesse Lyon, product metallurgist, Steel Dynamics Inc. – Flat Roll Group Southwest-Sinton Division, an AIST Foundation Steel Intern Scholarship helped open the door to an internship that eventually led to a full-time position.

Lyon credited experienced operators and colleagues with helping her develop confidence and technical knowledge. She encouraged young professionals to spend time in the mill, ask questions and acknowledge when they do not know an answer. Building those relationships, she explained, is essential to understanding production challenges and developing practical solutions.

Serena Patton, quality assurance manager, CMC Steel Tennessee, similarly emphasized hands-on experience and understanding the processes she was responsible for improving.

Patton recalled a male colleague's observation about the different expectations women sometimes face: "I can hit a single. You have to hit a home run." Rather than allowing those expectations to discourage her, Patton focused on preparation, technical knowledge and developing relationships with colleagues. She also shared how questioning the frequency of emergency drills contributed to changes in safety practices at her facility.



Rona Smeak, *Slippery Rock University*





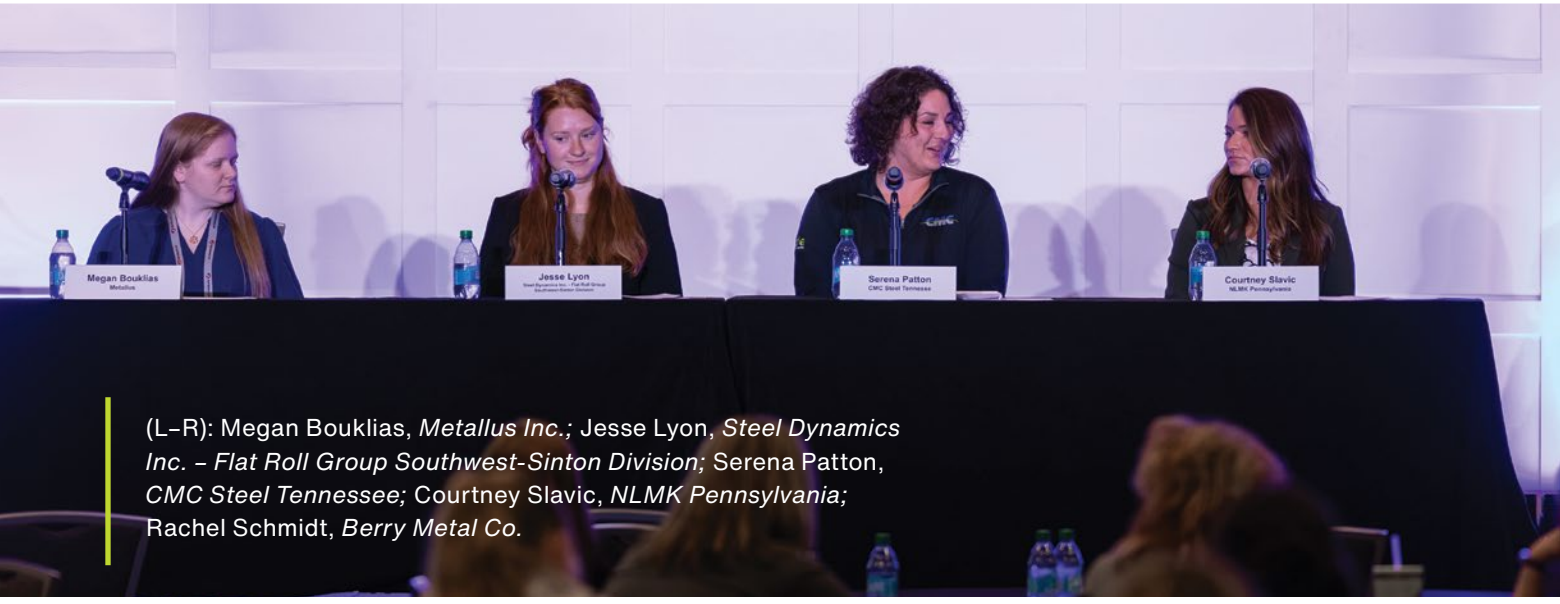
Judy Ferraro, *Judy Ferraro & Associates Inc.*

Courtney Slavic, environmental manager, NLMK Pennsylvania, discussed how involvement with the AIST Pittsburgh Member Chapter helped her expand her professional network and develop leadership skills. Beginning with young professional and sponsorship responsibilities, she progressed into chapter leadership while advancing her career.

The panel offered a perspective on the industry's future through the experiences of professionals already contributing to plant operations, product quality, safety and environmental performance. Their stories demonstrated both the challenges of entering the industry and the opportunities created by supportive colleagues, practical experience and professional involvement.

The final presentation, "EQ Matters," brought Judy Ferraro back to the stage, where she examined emotional intelligence and its role in effective leadership. Ferraro encouraged attendees to practice active listening, recognize emotional responses and strengthen relationships through everyday interactions.

Beyond the technical and professional development sessions, the conference created opportunities for attendees to connect in less formal ways. A visual note-taker captured session highlights through colorful illustrations, while an interactive engagement board invited attendees to answer a simple question: "What are you proud to bring to the steel industry?"



(L–R): Megan Bouklias, *Metallus Inc.;* Jesse Lyon, *Steel Dynamics Inc. – Flat Roll Group Southwest-Sinton Division;* Serena Patton, *CMC Steel Tennessee;* Courtney Slavic, *NLMK Pennsylvania;* Rachel Schmidt, *Berry Metal Co.*



Responses ranged from technical knowledge and creativity to resilience, collaboration, dedication to safety and a willingness to learn. Together, they offered a portrait of the experience, skills and perspectives represented at the conference.

A GooseChase scavenger hunt, She's Got the Beat Bingo and Find the Hypocycloid added opportunities for interaction. Networking receptions brought attendees together outside the meeting rooms, with dueling piano entertainment inspiring an impromptu conga line.

Exhibiting companies provided additional opportunities to explore products and services and connect with industry suppliers.

The conference's commitment to future generations also extended beyond its registered attendees. Through a partnership with Queen I Am, a Cleveland-based nonprofit organization, AIST hosted the Steel Strong Girls Experience, introducing girls ages 6–18 to opportunities in the steel industry through hands-on activities and mentoring.







Participants decorated hard hats to reflect their aspirations, a fitting symbol of the possibilities awaiting the next generation of engineers, steelmakers and industry leaders.

From experienced manufacturing professionals leading complex modernization projects to young women establishing their careers, the fourth annual Women in Steel Conference showcased the expertise, determination and leadership shaping the steel industry's future. The discussions reinforced that continued progress depends on technical innovation, opportunities for professional growth and the willingness of industry professionals to support one another.

AIST extends its appreciation to the conference planning committee, speakers, panelists, sponsors, exhibitors and attendees for their contributions to the event's success.

SAVE THE DATE: AIST Women in Steel Conference 2027, 13–15 September 2027, Pittsburgh, Pa., USA. ✦





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