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2025 Women in Steel Conference Recap



(L-R): Christina Edgerton, CMC; Sarah Gilley, Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.; Shannon Johnson-Kehoe, SSAB Americas; and Traci Rigdon, Steel Dynamics Inc.

By Jill Liberto

The AIST Women in Steel Conference, now in its third year, ventured west to the Marriott Indianapolis Downtown in Indianapolis, Ind., USA, and brought together 434 professionals from across the steel industry for three dynamic days of learning, connection and empowerment. The event, held 22–24 September 2025, celebrated the growing influence of women in steel while addressing key challenges, sharing powerful stories and fostering collaboration across all levels of the industry.

The conference began on Monday, 22 September, with four professional development sessions that set the tone for personal and organizational empowerment.

“Inclusive Pathways: Tackling Workforce Challenges for Underrepresented Groups,” led by LaSheita Sayer, Women Who Charge, encouraged participants to examine barriers facing minority professionals and create actionable plans for building inclusive work environments.

In her high-energy session, “Your Brain Can Be a Real A-hole: Overcoming Self-Sabotage for Career Success,” Jamie Lewis Smith, Pixel Leadership Group, blended neuroscience with motivation, helping participants rewire self-defeating thoughts into confidence and action.

Meanwhile, The Thinking Branch’s Brea Schmidt’s “Caring for the Caregiver” provided heartfelt insight into balancing caregiving and career responsibilities, urging attendees to embrace imperfection and community support.

“Navigating Difficult Conversations,” presented by Rebecca Malotke-Meslin, Pleasantly Aggressive Coaching & Consulting, was a sold-out session focusing on empathetic, clear communication and finding confidence in challenging dialogues.

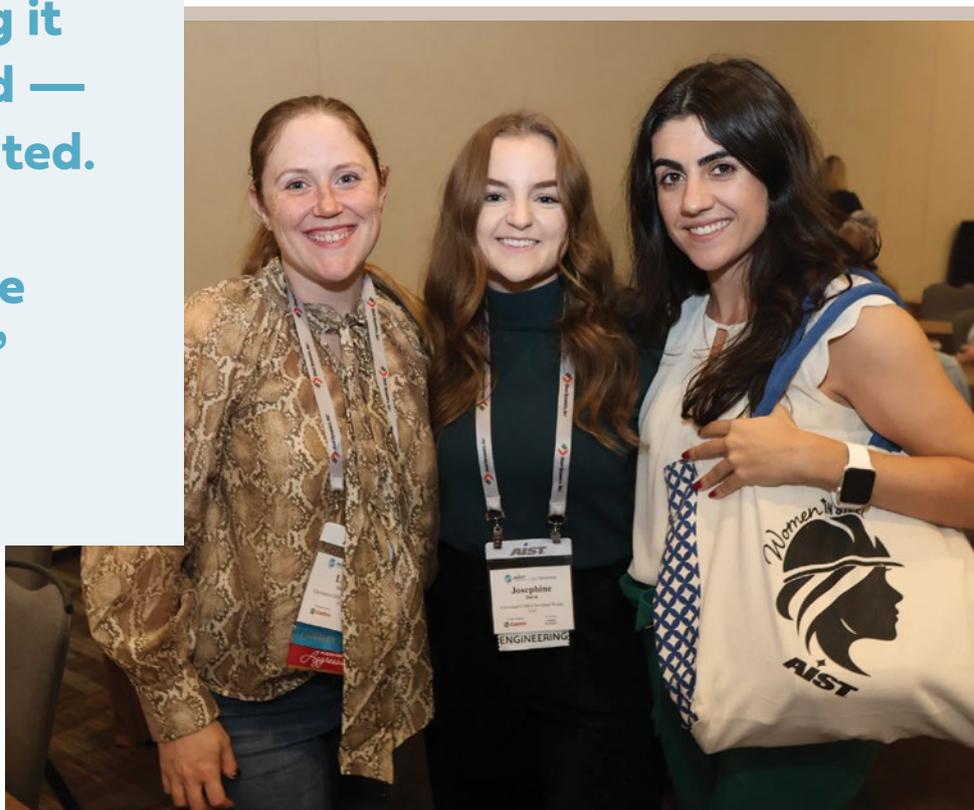
According to one attendee, the insightful sessions also served as icebreaker opportunities to engage in open discussion among the smaller groups. “I really appreciated how everyone in the room was open to sharing their stories and being vulnerable. This specific session gave me a more positive mindset that I can do hard things.”

The energy continued to rise at the welcome reception as attendees picked up swag bags and networked through a variety of activities, including making friendship bracelets and bookmarks. Throughout the conference, attendees also had the opportunity to partake in a scavenger hunt, visit the professional headshot suite and talk with exhibitors.

“This will be an event I do every year,” exhibitor Kelly Franko of Seraphina Safety Apparel said. “I had crowds of ladies here talking with me about the products and learning more about how we can help protect in the mill. It’s been a great event all around — an opportunity to talk with ladies and educate.”

“Let’s stop calling it male-dominated — it’s male-populated. That language matters, because we belong here.”

Shannon Johnson-Kehoe
SSAB





Stacy Varmecky, *Association for Iron & Steel Technology*

The second day began with a welcome from Stacy Varmecky, general manager — operations at AIST. Embracing the location of the conference, Varmecky referenced a symbolic statue situated in the heart of Indianapolis — Lady Victory, who represents a tribute to courage, perseverance and honor. “Today we gather in that same spirit: to celebrate progress, confront challenges head-on, and ensure women stand visibly and proudly at the center of our industry’s future,” began Varmecky.

Varmecky painted a striking picture of both progress and persistent inequality in the industrial workforce. She noted that women now represent 47.2% of the overall labor force — a slight but meaningful 0.5% increase from 2023. However, the data reveals an ongoing disconnect between education and employment in technical fields: women earn roughly 35% of all STEM degrees but hold only 28% of STEM roles worldwide. In the steel industry, the gap widens even further, with women comprising just 12% of the global workforce. Perhaps most troubling, Varmecky emphasized, is that these numbers have barely shifted in more than a decade, underscoring the deep-rooted barriers that continue to limit women’s participation and advancement in technical and industrial sectors.

Looking toward the future, Varmecky warned that the manufacturing industry faces an impending labor shortage that could significantly hinder growth. By 2033, U.S. manufacturing is projected to require 3.8 million new workers, yet without substantial progress in attracting and retaining talent, as many as 2 million of those jobs could remain unfilled. She characterized this not merely as a hiring issue but as a talent pipeline crisis.

“We simply cannot afford to leave half the population on the sidelines,” Varmecky emphasized, underscoring the critical need to attract and retain more women in manufacturing and technical roles to sustain the industry’s growth.

Her remarks served as both a wake-up call and a call to action — urging companies to address systemic barriers, build inclusive cultures, and ensure that women have equal opportunities to thrive in every part of the manufacturing and steel value chain. In the spirit of the conference, she concluded: “Together, we can write a new story for the industry’s future — one where every voice, every talent, every leader has a place in steel.”

To celebrate the women already leading the way forward, Sushma Walker, president of Nucor Business Technology, was presented with the 2025 MaryEmily Slate Trailblazer Award for Women in Steel. Walker said, “I am absolutely thrilled and deeply honored to receive the 2025 MaryEmily Slate Trailblazer Award for Women in Steel. MaryEmily was not only my hero but also a dear friend whose character and strength have always inspired me. This award holds profound meaning for me, and I am incredibly grateful to my Nucor teammates for the nomination and kind words.”



(L-R): Sushma Walker and April Pitts-Baggett, *Nucor Business Technology*, and Kelly Dallas, *Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.*

The morning continued with a fireside interview featuring pioneering entrepreneur Laureen Meroueh, founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Hertha Metals — the first woman to build a steel mill — in conversation with Jennifer Betts, CEO, Magnar Metals. Meroueh shared her entrepreneurial path, emphasizing the confidence, conviction and perseverance required to break barriers and launch a company, “Yes, it’s hard. Yes, it’s scary. But jump anyway. You won’t know what’s possible until you start.”

She detailed how Hertha Metals designed, built and commissioned the world’s largest decarbonized iron module in under three years — at a fraction of the cost of other emerging technologies — defying skepticism that new entrants could deliver at industrial scale. With the

system now successfully running, Meroueh underscored that innovation in steel is not theoretical; it must be executed, proven and commercially viable.

Meroueh underscored that the world relies on steel, making reliable, high-volume production essential even as the industry pursues decarbonization. Equally critical, she noted, is building a culture where diverse talent and new perspectives fuel progress — advocating for environments where women, young professionals and nontraditional innovators are empowered to lead. “We need to hold our ground and keep bringing in other women into this industry because it’s an incredible industry and we deserve to have a major role in it.”



Laureen Meroueh, *Hertha Metals*



The opening panel of the conference, “Not All Ladders Go Up,” set an empowering tone for the event by challenging the traditional definition of career success. Moderator Michelle Zwelling, corporate talent acquisition and development leader, guided a personal and candid discussion among panelists who shared stories of resilience, redefining ambition, and embracing nonlinear career growth. As panelist Christina Edgerton, vice president and general manager — Bridge Systems, Impact Metals and Performance Reinforcing Steel, CMC, shared, “Resilience can’t be our only strategy. Surround yourself with people and leaders who truly see you and support your growth.”

From navigating demanding leadership roles as new mothers to confronting bias and double standards in male-populated industries, panelists spoke honestly about the invisible work, emotional toll and personal tradeoffs that often accompany advancement.

They emphasized giving oneself permission to pause, reflect and choose what’s “right for me, right now.” The conversation evolved into a powerful reflection on self-worth, balance and fulfillment — reminding attendees that success isn’t always about climbing higher but about building a life and career that aligns with one’s values, well-being and sense of purpose.

“Success is finding a win every day. Did I show up? Did I make progress? Those small victories matter,” said panelist Tracy Rigdon, procurement specialist – Iron Metallics, Steel Dynamics Inc.

Panelist Sara Gilley, manager engineering – Rockport Works and manager infrastructure – Ohio Valley, Cleveland-Cliffs, agreed. “Success isn’t the title behind your name or the zeros on your paycheck. If you are fulfilled and proud of yourself, that’s success.”

Kicking off the afternoon sessions, keynote speaker Brea Schmidt, The Thinking Branch, invited attendees to pause from the fast pace of work and life to focus on self-care, vulnerability and authentic connection with her presentation, “What About You? Embracing Self-Care as a Professional Business Tool and Not Just a Buzzword.”

Through humor, vulnerability and powerful storytelling, Schmidt shared her personal journey from burnout and postpartum struggles to rediscovering balance and purpose. Her “cracked eggs” story resonated deeply with the audience as a symbol of how often women put everyone else first until they themselves are left depleted. She challenged attendees to ask the difficult but essential question: “How are you, really?” — first to themselves and then to those around them.



Brea Schmidt, *The Thinking Branch*

The session was interactive and heartfelt, with attendees sharing their own experiences of stress, burnout and healing. From leaders adopting “three deep breaths” pauses with their teams, to participants reflecting on postpartum depression and the stigma surrounding mental health in high-pressure industries, the discussion created a rare space of honesty and solidarity.

As attendees left the session, the energy in the room reflected not only inspiration but a renewed commitment to building a culture within the steel industry where care and connection are as valued as strength and productivity.

Smaller breakout sessions followed the afternoon networking break, which featured topic-specific discussions.

“I’ve never attended an ‘industry’ event such as this. I found the format to be very diverse and the topics having relevance to all attendees. I left feeling like every woman in my company should attend this event!”

Women in Steel Conference attendee

Breakout Sessions

“Safety for Women in the Workplace,” was facilitated by Rachel Schmidt, technical sales manager — EAF Mill Services, Berry Metal Co. Participants explored the broad landscape of safety as it specifically applies to women in industrial settings — recognizing that “safety” is not just about hard hats and steel-toed boots, but about inclusive, well-designed workplaces where everyone returns home safe.

“Steel Sharpens Steel: Forging Your Network, Building Your Empire,” was facilitated by Mindy Toth, vice president of human resources and HSE, Fives North American Combustion. Participants were invited to rethink networking as a strategic foundation for building influence, creating opportunities and empowering long-term career growth.

“Building Confidence on the Shop Floor,” was led by Nicole Sweet, head of end-to-end recycling — North America, RHI Magnesita. Participants worked through practical strategies to build confidence and presence in industrial work environments.

“The Motherload: Working Moms in Steel,” was led by April Pitts-Baggett, senior quality engineer, Nucor Business Technology. In this session, participants explored the unique challenges and strengths of working mothers in the steel industry.

“The Bullsh*t We Tell Ourselves: A Wake-Up Call for Authentic Living” — Delivered by Iris Goldfeder, founder, GasStoveCreative, this session encouraged attendees to show up authentically and dismantle the internal narratives that limit potential.

The day closed with “Asking for What You Need: Negotiating With Confidence,” where Rebecca Malotke-Meslin provided practical tools for self-advocacy and effective negotiation in the workplace. She emphasized the importance of clarity — knowing exactly what you want, why you want it, and the value it brings to both you and your organization. Malotke-Meslin addressed common fears, such as being perceived as greedy or aggressive, and reframed them as manageable mindset barriers rather than insurmountable obstacles. She walked through crafting compelling arguments and



LaSheita Sayer, *Women Who Charge*



Jamie Lewis Smith, *Pixel Leadership Group*

highlighted key negotiation tactics. Using real-life stories, she illustrated how understanding your audience, presenting a clear case and collaborating rather than confronting leads to better outcomes.

The conversations continued to flow through Tuesday's networking reception, where attendees visited the 12 exhibitor tables and enjoyed live entertainment and time to share their experiences from the day's program.

Jamie Lewis Smith, founder, Pixel Leadership Group, got the crowd on their feet to begin the final day of the conference with "Lighten Your Load: How to Stop the Cycle of Overwhelming Ownership," where she tackled the "Superwoman Syndrome" and being an "Anxious Super Supporter," offering strategies to delegate effectively, set boundaries and combat burnout.

“Every year gets better with this conference! It seems like it's really starting to hit its stride, and I can't wait to see what next year brings!”

Women in Steel Conference attendee

The Allies in Steel panel, moderated by Lauren Culbertson, vice president of engineering, Songer Services Inc., explored the role of male leadership in promoting gender equity. Executives from Nucor Steel Louisiana LLC, Algoma Steel Inc. and RHI Magnesita shared insights on building inclusive teams and industrywide allyship.

Culbertson opened the discussion by sharing her journey from a newcomer in cokemaking to leading major construction projects, emphasizing the importance of mentorship, community and the subtle messages of inclusion — or exclusion — women face in male-dominated workplaces.

The three male panelists shared personal experiences and actionable strategies for supporting women in the industry, from advocating in meetings to creating psychological safety, mentoring and fostering diversity at all levels. “I may never know what it’s like to be a woman in steel, but I’ve seen their challenges and their strengths — and I know the industry needs them,” said Sebastian Kukla, digital transformation North America, RHI Magnesita.

The panelists underscored that being an ally requires intentionality, listening and proactive engagement, and that the steel industry thrives when men and women collaborate, mentor one another and challenge traditional barriers together.

“This was my first time attending this conference and I loved it. I have already talked to my boss about going again in the future and what we can do at our company to promote this even more to the women that work here.”

Women in Steel Conference attendee



(L-R): Calvin Hart, *Nucor Steel Louisiana LLC*; Tom Katagis, *Algoma Steel Inc.*; and Sebastian Kukla, *RHI Magnesita*



(L–R): Olivia Holloway, *Steel Dynamics Inc.*; Jessica Lake, *Gerdau Special Steel North America*; Shelonda Manning, *U. S. Steel – Gary Works*; Alyssa Van Delden, *California Steel Industries*; and Alacyia Fields, *Nucor Steel Lexington*

Calvin Hart, vice president and general manager, Nucor Steel Louisiana LLC, emphasized: “There are powerful women in this industry. The world is evolving — and so should the rooms we sit in. Don’t fade into the background. Take up space. As leaders, we must create those spaces, but women should never be afraid to own them.”

The session generated many questions from the audience and concluded with practical advice for male colleagues on how to start becoming effective allies, reinforcing that supporting women is both a responsibility and a pathway to stronger, more innovative teams.

The final panel discussion, “Heat and Grit: Real Stories From the Shop Floor,” moderated by Alacyia Fields, safety and health director, Nucor Steel Lexington, showcased the journeys of women in the steel industry who started on the shop floor and rose to leadership roles, sharing both the challenges and triumphs they experienced along the way.

“This panel came about because we recognized a need,” Fields explained as she opened the discussion. “We wanted to highlight the women who started out on the shop floor — those who know what it means to face the real heat of this industry, both physically and mentally.”

Panelists recounted their nontraditional paths — some entering without degrees, others transitioning from different industries or union roles — and emphasized the

resilience, adaptability and determination required to succeed in a male-dominated field.

For panelist Shelonda Manning, operational excellence engineer, who has spent 26 years with United States Steel Corporation, entering the field wasn’t part of her plan — but perseverance turned it into a lifelong career.

“I told my mom I’d only stay five years,” she laughed. “That five years has now turned into 26 — and honestly, the money kept me here, but so did the challenge and the pride that comes with doing this work.”

Her mother, also a longtime steelworker, had once warned her against following in her footsteps. “She’d seen what women went through 50 years ago,” Manning added, “but I wanted to make my own path — and make it better for the ones coming after.”

They shared stories of pivotal mentors, workplace obstacles, and personal risks that shaped their careers, highlighting how failures, support systems and stepping outside comfort zones contributed to their growth.

Olivia Holloway, safety coordinator, Steel Dynamics Inc., took an unconventional path into the field. “I came from the medical device industry with a background in chemistry,” she shared. “My first day in the mill, I thought, ‘Where the hell am I?’ It felt like I’d walked into a horror movie. But I learned fast — and I fell in love with the pace, the people and the purpose.”



*Tamika Catchings, WNBA Hall of Famer,
entrepreneur and philanthropist*

The conversation also explored the importance of representation, mentorship and leaving a legacy that inspires future women leaders, with a common theme of perseverance, authenticity, and making the industry more inclusive and accessible for the next generation.

As the panel closed, Fields reflected on how far the industry has come — and how far it still has to go. “There’s a different kind of heat when you’re walking a different path,” she said. “It’s not just the temperature on the shop floor — it’s the pressure, the expectations, the mental grit it takes to keep showing up. But these women are proof that it can be done — and done well.”



The conference concluded with “Strength in Every Arena: Lessons in Leadership From Sports to Industry,” an engaging conversation with Tamika Catchings, WNBA Hall of Famer, entrepreneur and philanthropist, interviewed by Jackie Clague, key account manager, Castrol Industrial North America Inc. Catchings’ stories and reflections on perseverance, service, and authentic leadership encouraged attendees to lead boldly and uplift others.

The third annual AIST Women in Steel Conference celebrated the strength, resilience and innovation of women shaping the future of the steel industry. Through candid conversation, skill-building and shared storytelling, the event reinforced that progress in steel — like the metal itself — is forged under heat and pressure, emerging stronger and more resilient than ever.

The 2026 Women in Steel Conference will take place 21–23 September at the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland in Cleveland, Ohio, USA.

AIST thanks the premier event sponsor Castrol, event sponsors Algoma Steel Inc. and Carpenter Technology Corp., as well as all other sponsors and exhibitors for their contributions and support. ♦

“ I thought this was one of the best conferences I’ve attended in my career.”

Women in Steel Conference attendee

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