

Manitoba's First Female Crane Operator

Ellen Kotula

We live in an ever changing world with increasing advances in technology and medicine including continued development of human reasoning. Even so, with such advances, society has not progressed to where men and women are considered to be on equal footing in many aspects of life.

Despite these challenges, there continues to be a few modest victories won from time to time that are worthy to be illustrated. One such achievement is the life story of Ellen Kotula, Manitoba's first female Crane Operator.

Ellen grew up North of the city in St. Andrews on a small hobby farm where her parents had 40 acres. From there her father operated his own construction business and welding shop and eventually got into the business of cranes.

At the age of sixteen, Ellen started working at the family business, Interlake Crane.

"I was a bit of a tom boy growing up, and wasn't really into barbies etc. as other little girls were."

She worked on the administrative side of the company where she performed general office duties including the payroll. Over time she became very interested in the Crane industry.

She attended university in her early twenties where she obtained a commerce degree in business. Coming from an entrepreneurial family, she wanted to know more about operating a business.

She continued working in the family business where she always emphasized safety. Some years later, she married, moved to Alberta and resided there for five years. During those years, she worked as a Health & Safety Environmental Advisor for Schlumberger, a large oil company in Whitecourt, Alberta.



After she and her husband had a family of their own, they decided it was time to move back to Manitoba to be close to her family. Ellen started working as a safety consultant in Winnipeg for a private company.

Her Dad asked if she would be willing to come back to work for him. Ellen accepted and brought not only her financial background, but her training and experience as a Health & Safety Advisor. It was a good fit.

Since her father was getting closer to retirement, it became evident that

a succession plan was needed. "I suggested that I could take over the family business, and my Dad thought that it was a good idea."

As an employer now, Ellen wants to be prepared as much as possible for when she assumes full ownership of the company.

"When it comes to operating, you have to ensure that you train your employees correctly so that they conduct all aspects of the job properly."

Ellen is also very safety conscious, and enjoys providing people with a better understanding of their own equipment and it's operations.

"I aim to make safety meetings as meaningful as possible for our employees in hopes that it has value for them. Getting employees to have a change in their attitude is important."

Around two years ago, Ellen decided she wanted to have a change of pace from the office, so she sought to become a crane operator. She understood the industry from the financial and safety side, but now wanted to develop her skills as an operator.

When Ellen registered for the Crane Operator Apprenticeship program, she got a call from Peter Goodson at Apprenticeship Manitoba who welcomed her to the trade. He proceeded to say "Just so you know, you're going to be the first female in this trade."

Ellen recalls "My jaw hit the ground....I couldn't believe it...this is 2013, this seemed pretty shocking!"

She was so surprised, because in Alberta, she's seen a lot of females in the trades as equipment operators, welders, etc. and was wondering why Manitoba was so behind the times. Whatever the reason, she feels very privileged & special.

"WOW! I can be a mentor to other females down the road. I'll be like a role model they can look up to, and be an inspiration to others who want to get into this trade."

She also observed that most men on the job site agree it's about time there's a woman behind the controls.

"The guys are very respectful to me. Being on a job site the first few times was quite an experience. They understood that I was just learning, and they were always willing to help me out. Guys are different on a job-site when they're around ladies."

Last year, one of her customers was doing a shut

down and told Ellen that they only wanted one operator for this job. They told her "I want you to be my operator." Ellen replied "We've got two journeymen, are you sure you want *me* to do this job?" he replied "Absolutely, I want you for the job." Reason being, he wanted his guys to experience what it's like to have a female on the job site. The guys mentioned how great it was to

have a female working with them, giving them a totally different perspective.

Growing up on the farm she was always comfortable around heavy equipment. She operated tractors, loaders and other various pieces of equipment most of her life. She believes that being a Crane Operator is a really good trade to be involved in as a career.

She was inspired to choose this career due to her greatest mentor in life, her father Fred. Her Dad's been a crane operator for years,

and he always showed her the ropes.

"Learning and observing how other operators worked was great....the guys would always say "well I don't want you to watch too much cause you're gonna go out and do it."

As for the future, Ellen sees herself having successfully taken over the business, and continuing to operate cranes. She would also like to train other apprentices so they can benefit

from the skills she's learned. She hopes to hire more operators, and possibly even attract Journeymen to the business as it grows.

"I hope to be given the chance to pass on my knowledge and experience to others and maybe even hire more females!"

Ellen will always be recognized as being one of the pioneers who blazed the trail for women in this industry. She is truly an inspiration to us all.



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