Women playing a crucial role in creating a diverse workforce in mining both here in Nevada and across the nation.
It’s no secret that mining has been an important part of Nevada’s rich history. In a 2016 Fraser Institute Annual Survey of Mining Companies, Nevada ranked the fourth most attractive place in the world for mining investment. Nevada is the second-largest silver producer in the United States. Mining directly employs about 28,000 people in Nevada. Of those employees, between 13 and 14 percent are women.

by Corrine Casanova
Women play a crucial role in creating a diverse workforce in mining both here in Nevada and across the nation.

Dana Bennett, Ph.D., president of the Nevada Mining Association, is the first woman to serve as president of the organization. She noted that mining has changed, both in the diversity of the workforce and the types of jobs available, since the Association was founded in 1913.

“What happens in the mining industry certainly affects what happens in the Association, and the percentage of women in the mining workforce has grown during the last 20 years. There is a lot of interest from our members to increase the number of women who are working in mining. It is important to have a diversity of opinions and viewpoints—it is incredibly important to our members,” Bennett said.

Bennett's interest in the mining industry has a lot to do with history—she is a trained historian. She wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on women and tax policy before the 1960s.

“There are currently an estimated 120 mining occupations, ranging from skilled trades to high tech positions. These positions include geologists, mining and mineral engineers, heavy equipment operators, crane operators, underground miners, lawyers, environmental managers, financial analysts, refiners, computer programmers and the list goes on.

While the average salary is $96,000 and the benefits are superior, building a mining workforce has its challenges. Most of these jobs are in rural areas.

“We are always looking at ways to better develop and diversify our workforce. We have training opportunities for our current workforce and work closely with educational institutions to help prepare the future workforce and provide safer worksites. Our great educational partners include the University of Nevada, Reno and community colleges throughout Nevada,” Bennett said.

Another organization, the Women's Mining Coalition, was created in part to share diverse viewpoints from women with our national lawmakers. As a grassroots organization, it lobbies and educates legislators about supporting environmentally responsible mining. This national organization has members from 25 states who come from all different disciplines, but have the same goal in mind—be creative, work the logistics out and get things done. Geologist Ruth Carracher, one of the founding members, recently won the Prazen Award from the National Mining Hall of Fame & Museum for her ongoing, innovative work on educating others about the importance of mining in our daily lives.

In 1993, when Geologist Kathy Benedetto recruited Carracher and fellow geologist Debra Struhsacker to educate newly elected women lawmakers in Washington D.C. about minerals exploration and mining, the organization's impact expanded. The original idea was to put a new face on the mining industry by organizing annual fly-ins to the nation's capital. They succeeded in doing that and more by educating female lawmakers and telling stories. Carracher said, “On our first trip to Congress we shared a story of a single woman with five children. She was working four to five part-time jobs earning about $25,000 a year and no benefits prior to working at a mine near Elko. By landing a job in mining (in 1993), she was now making about $55,000 a year with full benefits. Eventually, four of her five children got college scholarships. That's an excellent example of what mining can do for families.”

After that first trip, they knew that not just female lawmakers could benefit from their message so they decided to cast a wider net and share their knowledge and stories with all of Congress.

Caption 1

From left to right - Camille Prenn, Debra Struhsacker, Ruth Carracher | Photo Marcello Rostagni

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one in southern Nevada. This workshop is open to all educators, regardless of where they teach. NvMA provides workshops about mining, the science behind it, and even develops lesson plans and activities so educators can take it back to their classrooms and use it right away. They also organize mine tours to working mines, so teachers have firsthand knowledge of how modern mines operate. Activities like these underscore the organization's commitment to education and Nevada's future workforce.

“I really enjoy presenting what we do to others. It is great fun, because I can talk about it as a historian and as a member of the Association. I can talk about our past, heritage, and future because we are producing those metals and minerals that are needed for our emerging sectors and we are proud of our history. We are also proud to be a part of our state's future,” Bennett said.

How can business owners in northern Nevada get involved in mining, if you aren’t already? For starters, you can attend the Nevada Mining Association convention September 6-9 at Lake Tahoe. If you are interested in joining or donating to the Women's Mining Association, you can do so at wmc-usa.org.

“Women who are working for your organizations can help Congress recognize how important mining is to each industry. If you are going to make a product, you need materials and resources to do so. And it’s not going to be just gold and silver. For instance, right now, myself and two other geologists are working with a company to look at feasibility of extracting lithium from a clay mine. Lithium goes into batteries so all the cell phones and cameras, not just batteries for cars. It’s everywhere. Everything begins with mining, everything,” Carraher said.

Both Bennett and Carraher share a similar passion for the mining industry. There’s a certain camaraderie there.

The NvMA helps educate legislators and the public about it in a myriad of ways. For example, for 30 years, NvMA has hosted an annual mineral education workshop for teachers—one in northern Nevada and one in southern Nevada. This workshop is open to all educators, regardless of where they teach. NvMA provides workshops about mining, the science behind it, and even develops lesson plans and activities so educators can take it back to their classrooms and use it right away. They also organize mine tours to working mines, so teachers have firsthand knowledge of how modern mines operate. Activities like these underscore the organization's commitment to education and Nevada's future workforce.

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