



BLAST the glass ceiling

Nyah Teiotu (Bachelor of Engineering '11 / Bachelor of Engineering (Honours Class 2B) '16) is a proud Wemba Wemba woman, BHP's first Indigenous female engineer, and the Queensland Resources Council's Most Exceptional Person of 2019. *Contact's* Rachel Westbury sat down with the blast and drill mining specialist to learn how she is leading the charge for the next generation of Indigenous women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) fields.

When did you first realise you wanted to be an engineer?

I was 18 and in my first year of a science degree. I attended a careers expo at UQ and all the employers wanted engineering students. That summer break I applied to study engineering, and I started the next year at UQ. During my first vacation role as an undergraduate civil engineer, I was working in the Hunter Valley mines with amazing people and learnt what it was like to work on a mine site. I was in awe of the big trucks. That's when I knew I wanted to be an engineer.

Why did you decide to specialise in drilling and blasting? Do you feel that your experience at UQ helped take your career to a new level?

I was working as a civil engineer in the Pilbara mines. I wanted to work in mine planning as the lifestyle roster was more appealing – I had been on a three-weeks-on, one-week-off construction roster at the time. With the support of my husband and my mother, I went back to study mining engineering at UQ and graduated two years later in 2016. UQ mining gave me the confidence to pursue a mining career. I worked really hard and achieved good results. I had my daughter in my final semester, I received a Dean's Commendation for Academic Excellence and graduated with second class honours. I took that confidence, work ethic and resilience and applied it to my mining graduate roles. The momentum led me to a permanent role as a drill and blast engineer at Blackwater mine.

You volunteer with the Australian Indigenous Educational Foundation (AIEF) scholarship program to mentor Indigenous students in STEMM. Why is this cause so close to your heart?

I was a recipient of the AIEF-BHP scholarship in my final year of mining, and the scholarship provided an opportunity to apply for a graduate role with BHP. Financially, the scholarship allowed my family to live close to UQ so I could easily walk, while very pregnant, to and from my classes. Living so close when my daughter was born allowed my mum to bring her to uni, where I could breastfeed during my study breaks. I will always be grateful for the support I received from the AIEF, and this is the reason I continue to support and raise awareness of the AIEF. I believe the program works – I am the proof, the first Indigenous female engineer to work at BHP.

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Describe your experience as a woman working in a male-dominated industry.

I am proud to work for BHP as they have ambitious targets to achieve gender balance by 2025. My experience at BHP has been very positive. This is largely because 'respect' is one of the charter values and, as a result, I work in a genuinely respectful workplace. Being Aboriginal, I was taught to be respectful to my Elders. Respect is a value I always live by and that's how I choose to treat people. I believe you can limit yourself if you believe your gender is the reason why you don't get opportunities. To overcome this, I've worked hard, set goals and expressed these goals to my leaders. I am not afraid to be myself, show my passions and overcome barriers.

Can you tell us about any challenges you have overcome on your journey to career success?

I have been fortunate that I have a supportive husband, and that my mother lives with us as the primary carer of our daughter. Their support allows me to focus on building my career and continuing to advocate for more Indigenous engineers. My most recent challenge has been dealing with terrible morning sickness while working a seven-day, 12-hour roster! Thankfully, I've been able to switch to a Monday-to-Friday roster with normal working hours. My superintendent and lead engineer were very supportive. I believe there is always a solution that is good for the individual and the business.

Any advice for the next generation of Indigenous STEMM students who are hoping to make a difference?

Work hard, have a good attitude and don't be ashamed to find opportunities for yourself to learn and grow. This will make a great difference to yourself and within your family and community.

UQ WOMEN CREATE CHANGE

To learn more about how UQ is working to improve gender equity in STEMM, visit sage-pilot.uq.edu.au.

Top 5

REASONS TO BE AN ENGINEER

- 1. Financial independence:** I bought my first home with my mother when I was 21 and working as a cadet.
- 2. Opportunity:** There is a lot of opportunity to grow and develop in your engineering career. There are many places to live and work around this great country.
- 3. Expert skills:** You gain the ability to deliver solutions to problems, which is a very valuable skill to society.
- 4. Teamwork:** Working in a team means you won't get stuck on a problem for too long. You share suggestions to find a solution.
- 5. Lifestyle:** There are flexible work arrangements available to suit your needs while working in mining.