

International Day of Women and Girls in Science – Q&A

BY: JULIE SCOTT, PE ON FEBRUARY 9, 2024



In honor of the International Day of Women and Girls in Science on February 11th, Sanborn Head sought feedback from some of our early-career female employees on what drives them, and why they chose to pursue a career in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

Four women, each from a different service area within the company, and each with their own story, were asked to respond to a series of questions about what it means to be a woman in a science related field. The questions, along with their candid responses, are presented here.

While the gender gap has narrowed over the years, women nevertheless continue to face challenges and barriers to their success in STEM disciplines and industries. The words of these four Sanborn Head team members are a reminder of the importance of **diversity, equity, and inclusion** (DEI) in the workplace and the role we can all play in encouraging them in their STEM goals. On this special day, we celebrate these women, and people of all gender identities, who have inspired a young person to take a leap.

What area(s) of STEM do you work in?

- **Emily Finger (Project Geologist, Industrial Market)** – I work in the “S” Science field as a project geologist. However, my work is interdisciplinary, and I often apply approaches and concepts from technology, engineering, and mathematics daily.
- **Lauren Guiry (Project Environmental Scientist, Development Market)** – I am an environmental scientist for the developer market within Sanborn Head. So, when looking at the abbreviation itself, I fit into the Science category! I consider myself both an environmental scientist and a geologist, as my college curriculum and experience thankfully included both.
- **Leslie Montoya (Environmental Data Specialist, Data Management & Visualization)** – Currently I work in data management, but I also have experience in environmental field work. My educational background is in structural geology.
- **Maddie Parent (Engineer, Solid Waste Market)** – In May of 2023 I graduated from the University of Vermont with a Bachelor’s degree in Environmental Engineering and now I currently work as an engineer in the Solid Waste market area.

Is there a person, group, or event in your life that influenced your decision to work in a STEM field? What set them (it) apart?

- **Emily** – Although my mother never worked in a STEM field, she introduced me to science as a young child. Some of these experiences included a chemistry experiment themed birthday party, identifying fossils collected on the shores of Lake Michigan, and visiting the Cave of the Mounds in Wisconsin. I have always enjoyed the study of science as it has allowed me to explore the unknown, problem solve and think critically, and do work that is impactful.
- **Lauren** – One particular class in high school really influenced my decision to enter the STEM field and to pursue my chosen path in college. AP Environmental Science, and (of course!) its associated field trips, really opened my eyes to the possibility of hands on, outdoor, everchanging and exploratory work – and I loved it. I am a very visual, physical learner, and this class and its topics intrigued me immensely. At my young age, the thought of mixing outdoor activities with a career that could potentially aid a planet in crisis seemed perfect. The constant reminders that women are scarce in the STEM field didn’t hurt either. I am not usually one to back down from challenges, and I believe the reward, in similar cases, is just that much better.
- **Leslie** – I became a geologist because I spent my childhood summers helping my family run a ruby and sapphire mine in the mountains of North Carolina. I would meet people from all over the world who came to our mine because it was “unsalted,” meaning anything they found was native material. Over time I realized I knew how to answer the customer’s questions about identifying their gems, but I couldn’t answer why the gems were there or how they formed. The questions I didn’t know how to answer about rubies and sapphires when I was young are

what inspired me to become a geologist.

- **Maddie** – Growing up I was naturally better at math and science than reading or writing. My dad also heavily encouraged my interests in STEM as well as my love for the environment. As I got older, I started to identify engineers as having one of the largest influences on the way society functions and interacts with the environment. When you put all of that together studying and working as an environmental engineer seemed to be the perfect choice.

What is it like to be a woman in STEM? Do you feel your gender gives you a different perspective and experience from your male counterparts?

- **Emily** – Being a woman in STEM can be challenging, but it can also be very rewarding and empowering. It is important to have confidence and courage as a woman in STEM so we can be heard and recognized for our roles and contributions in science. I feel women are detail-oriented, likely more so than our male counterparts, which may help us provide new and different perspectives that may have otherwise been overlooked or not even considered.
- **Lauren** – Being a woman in STEM is both tough and overly gratifying. I would be lying if I said I've never experienced criticism, intimidation, or hardship in my career thus far; however, it is very clear to me in most tough memories that final success in times of pushback or stress feels the most rewarding. I believe women can always supply a different, useful perspective, which – when combined with that of our male peers – can uncover a pretty amazing complement. Every individual person can provide perspective grounded in lived experiences and knowledge, no matter their gender.
- **Leslie** – Being a woman in STEM can certainly be intimidating, but you will quickly learn that your best advocate is yourself. In grad school I was my advisor's first female student, and it took some time for him to figure out that he didn't have to treat me differently. After grad school when I was a field technician, I worked on a site where there were literally hundreds of men and 2-3 women (including myself). My gender definitely gave me a different perspective in those situations because I realized that my male managers absolutely had good intentions, but sometimes things would totally fly over their heads. For example, I was sent to work oversight on a drilling project in an abandoned warehouse with one bathroom and no door. That may have been fine for the six male drillers onsite, but I created a system where if there was a plank of wood across the entryway that meant it was ladies (me) only!
- **Maddie** – To me, being a woman in STEM is a way to make my voice heard. With any decision-making process, the more diverse the team is, the better the outcome. While I may not have much experience in this field yet, I do have my own unique thought process that allows me to thoughtfully complete my work in a way others may not.

Do you have any advice for women looking to pursue careers in the STEM fields? Possibly something you wished you had known when you first started?

- **Emily** – For women looking to pursue a career in STEM fields, my best advice is to show support to other female colleagues, including social support in an academic or work setting and even emotional support. These types of support can include providing constructive feedback and offering encouragement and advice. Navigating the STEM field will provide its challenges, and support from female mentors and peers can shape or even dictate how you will respond to opposition or hardships. It is also more fulfilling to celebrate successes and cheer on your colleagues knowing that you may have played a role in their success.
- **Lauren** – I would encourage all women looking to pursue careers in STEM to always hold onto their confidence in any decision, statement, judgment, etc., for your voice is just as valuable as any other, and it needs to be heard! It is easier said than done, and this opinion is even long overdue for myself, but – we can't let the small, everyday setbacks stop the overall goal. For me, that goal is continued tenure in the STEM field.
- **Leslie** – My advice to women aspiring to work in STEM is to not be afraid to, or apologize for, advocating for yourself, ever. If you're having trouble with something in the office or in the field, no one will know that things need to change unless you vocalize it. Honestly, in my experience, my male counterparts respected me more and were more thoughtful after watching me advocate for myself.
- **Maddie** – One piece of advice I would share is to not be afraid to take any opportunity that even slightly interests you. Similarly, don't be afraid to network and talk to people in areas you're interested in. I attended almost every job fair and information session while in school and it really helped me get a feel for the industry as well as make connections I wouldn't otherwise have made.