

‘Wherever I am, I’m going to be building something...’

Jennifer Smith’s mom was both amused and a little concerned. Amused because five-year-old Jennifer had taken apart every toy she owned to see how it worked---and put them back together, too. But Mom was a bit concerned because Jennifer had announced that she was going into the construction business when she grew up. That’s pretty non-traditional for a child, especially a girl. “I’m going to build houses,” little Jennifer declared with authority. “She’ll probably outgrow it,” Mom thought.

Jennifer hasn’t outgrown it. In fact, she has grown into it.

Jennifer is a sophomore at Florida A&M, majoring in Construction Engineering Technology. She knew where she was going at age five, and now she’s well on her way.

A significant step in her journey was the four years of construction classes she took from Mr. Kevin Ward at McEachern High School in Powder Springs, GA. “Jennifer’s only question was about which discipline she wanted to specialize in,” Ward recalled. “She was absolutely certain that construction was her career choice. I don’t ever recall any other freshman student who knew so clearly what she or he wanted to do in life.”

Jennifer breezed through the core curriculum of safety, hand tools, power tools, construction math, blueprint reading and rigging. Then she looked at masonry, carpentry, and plumbing, but chose electrical as her field of study.

Why electrical? “Problem solving,” Jennifer said without hesitation. “Say someone wants switches on three different walls to control a light and fan in the middle of a room. I love to figure out the easiest way to lay out the circuit and use the least amount of wire. You have to factor in what else is going to be on the circuit and how the source wiring run is going to be made from the breaker box. There’s only one best solution, and I love to find it.”

“Jennifer’s interpersonal skills are most amazing,” Ward continued. “I’ve never seen anyone so focused. She was awarded a Dual Seal Diploma from McEachern. She was inducted into both the National Honor Society and the National Technical Honor Society. She was instrumental in starting the National Technical Honor Society chapter at our school and she was active in the local chapter of both honor societies.”

Jennifer’s electrical interests expanded into industrial motor controls. She won first place in the Georgia SkillsUSA industrial motor controls contest---twice! “You just can’t imagine the thrill of being the lone woman competing against the best men in the state and winning first place. I also got to compete in the National SkillsUSA contests in Kansas City. I’ll never forget the excitement of those three trips,” she said wistfully. Three trips? “Yeah. I came in second in the state contest my sophomore year, so I got to go that year, too.” In her senior year, Jennifer placed 12th in the nation!

Now that she is in college, Jennifer’s focus has narrowed a bit. She has decided she wants to pursue construction management.

“I was President of my SkillsUSA Chapter for two years. I found out you can get a lot more done by organizing a group of people toward a common goal than you can get done by yourself. That’s why I chose Construction Engineering Technology as my major.

I am learning the tools I need to organize projects and teams of people. I love to work with a group of dedicated people to get a job done, and done right," she explained. "I'm really looking forward to my internship this summer so I can practice using some of the tools I've learned."



Jennifer Smith installs industrial motor control wiring and switches in the National SkillsUSA contest in Kansas City. She placed 12th in the nation in the contest. Asked why she became interested in working on electrical skills and knowledge, Smith said that it was the thrill of problem solving. "There's only one best solution, and I love to find it." Smith is enrolled at Florida A&M, majoring in Construction Engineering Technology.

Asked how she found out how to get an internship, Jennifer exuberantly described the placement programs at Florida A&M. "The school works hard to help us find jobs. A lot of companies come onto campus and talk to us about what's available. That's how I found Hensel Phelps Construction Company, with whom I'll be doing my summer internship. I don't know where I'll be this summer. They have jobs all over the country. But wherever I am, I'm going to be building something and using the tools I've learned here at school. Wow! What an adventure!"

Some students are going to be lying around this summer wondering what they're going to do with their life. Jennifer Smith is going to be doing with her life what she's wanted to do since she was five---construction.