



How a 'PINK' SUPERHERO Succeeds in a Man's World

By Elizabeth Whitchurch • Photos by Tom Lindfors

Across the stage clomps a woman in untied work boots that have seen the better side of being new; her unmistakable red hair in braids. Tattoos peek out from under the sleeves of her blue graduation gown where golden honors cords swing as she walks. She reaches the microphone, turns and beams at the audience. She's to deliver the student speech at WITC's 2009 commencement. Then Jenny Bannink begins to speak and eloquent, passionate words about the excellent education she found at WITC flow forth.

She speaks of trying a four-year college, a variety of jobs and of finally realizing the need to do what she loves. Though Bannink attended a four-year college, she found the coursework "bland," and her grades suffered and her exceptional writing skills faded. Bannink now realizes her passion began as a child with tinkering and repairing the engines at home. "I would hold my breath as I waited for that spark that

created combustion and the purr that indicated I was truly brilliant," Bannink says. "I was missing that spark. And I didn't want to spend tens of thousands of dollars in tuition to figure out what I wanted to do with my life."

Bannink left the university after the first year and pursued a few temp jobs "trying out careers." In one position, she was an operator at a laser machine job shop. There she learned auto-CAD, beam and optic adjustments and machine repair; but she didn't realize how much she enjoyed the position until she'd moved on to find success and prestige as an office contractor.

"I realized there was no happiness for me in a cubical," Bannink says. "I yearned to work behind a toolbox again."

A few years later, a new opportunity arose in a metal fabrication shop as a laser tech. "I did not have the education, but I had the experience." Unfortunately the place was dimly lit, loud and filthy, and she experienced gender bias. After several surgeries caused by lifting excessive weight and a shop slowdown, she was laid off.



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"That was my golden ticket – it guided me to the doors of WITC-New Richmond," she says. So she painted her old toolbox pink "as a wink and a nod to the old notion that women do not belong in the trades," and enrolled in the machine tooling technics program. The 'spark' was back.

Initially concerned, she found paying for college was not as fearsome as she expected. She applied for scholarships and received awards from local businesses, WITC, the Surgeons of Steel, and the Minnesota Tool Builders Association, and she worked a tool shop she enjoyed. Bannink learned how to process plastic, so she took a plastic injection molding set-up class at WITC.

Freshly graduated with honors from WITC with both a technical diploma in machine tooling technics and a plastic injection molding certificate, Bannink's world was set – for a while. But then the tool shop experienced a slowdown, and she had to find another job to meet her financial responsibilities. She found one, but it wasn't a good fit. Her health suffered, and she was job seeking again.

This time, however, she had options. "I realized everyone seems to need a skilled tradesman, be it welders, machinists, programmers, toolmakers or CNC operators.

"After checking out a few places, I found the place I wanted to park my pink toolbox for good," Bannink says with a smile. "I accepted a job at SMC Ltd. in Somerset, [Wis.]

"It's a clean, well-lit facility with top-of-the-line technology. They've been growing rapidly – even during the rough patches in the economy. They're innovation-built around integrity, and I have respect for their practices and vision," Bannink explains.

Pink toolbox in tow, Bannink now happily works at SMC with a team of "unique men, superbly intelligent, impressively resourceful, tremendously empathetic, unbelievably patient and always willing to help in the best interest of advancing the team and protecting the future of our trade.

"You need to love what you do," Bannink says, an engaging smile brightening her face. She describes herself as "a toolmaker, a machinist, a programmer, a CNC set-up

operator, a tool repair technician, a precision engineer, a lifelong student, a mentor and an elite member of a group of superheroes in the tool room who wear their capes backwards.

"I appreciate the vast opportunities that my career at SMC Ltd. affords me, and I take pride in my work," she explains. "The feeling of accomplishment associated with repairing a mold brings me great joy."

Looking ahead, Bannink says a "tradesman is a permanent student." She learns every day and adds to her superhero list: design, engineering, automation, supervision, estimation, management.

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For more information about WITC's machine tooling technics program, visit witc.edu/programs. ■