



Franklin Focus: CSX's terminal manager has her dream job

By ANDREA RICH City Editor

When Alison Smith was a little girl, she'd lie on the attic floor and throw the switch to move her dad's collectible model trains around their tracks. As a grown woman today, her job is to make sure trains leave the CSX intermodal yard in Chambersburg on time with the right freight, choreographing a dance between truck and rail that has become her dream job.

Smith is the terminal manager for CSX Chambersburg, having been with the company now for 15 years, the last two here in Chambersburg during first the construction, and now the operation and growth of the CSX Intermodal Terminal.

Her parents both worked for CSX for a combined 70-plus years of service. They were introduced on a blind date after hearing each other on the phone. Her mom did clerical work for the railroad, her dad was a crew dispatcher. They both continued to work for CSX until retirement.

"I was always around trains, always around the railroad family," Smith said of her childhood. She grew up in Florence, S.C. and moved with her parents to Jacksonville, Fla. Her first job was as a part time hourly employee doing data entry for the employee development department at CSX.

Her first CSX paycheck was copied by her dad, framed, and rests on the mantel of her parent's home to this day. The elementary school drawings and high school report cards that had graced her parents' refrigerator door through her childhood are now replaced with Public Opinion articles about Smith being the terminal manager for CSX in Chambersburg and news of the local terminal, she said.

Her first few roles with CSX were office-type jobs, including a stint in the technology department. While there, the company elected to outsource its technology work, and Smith was without a job.

"It was the worst day of my life," Smith said of that long-ago day. Not just because she went from self-sufficient to unemployed, but because she knew she had to call home and tell her dad - a railroad man to the very marrow of his bones and a proud company man to boot - that she no longer worked for CSX.

Smith immediately applied for every opening CSX had, and also for jobs in her field outside the railroad industry. Was it time to change her career direction?

The answer to that question must have been "no," because Smith had other offers, including Blue Cross of South Carolina and DisneyWorld.

She declined both, and accepted a job with CSX for "a tremendous cut in pay" working for the first time in the intermodal division of the company.

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"It was a totally different world," Smith said.

The role here in Chambersburg follows supervisory positions in Jacksonville as the manager of truck dispatchers at a CSX Intermodal facility, and before that as operations supervisor in Charleston. The Charleston job was her first field job with intermodal.

"It's really where I caught the bug," Smith said, of hands on, sometimes get dirty, field work.

CSX doesn't have many female terminal managers, but she's not the only one, Smith said, adding "It's not just a man's job. I've gotten a lot of opportunities (with CSX) because I'm good at what I do."

CSX operates from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. Fleets of trucks arrive with cargo for the trains, and cargo comes off the trains and leaves the railyard via truck. About 40 employees - 11 of which work for CSX and the rest for vendors - each have a role in making sure things are done correctly and on time. It's not uncommon for Smith's plan for the day on how she'll manage the coming and going of cargo to change by lunchtime because she has new information. She also has to balance the priority of what needs shipped now and what can wait, with the availability of rail cars.

"There are a lot of cogs in that wheel to make sure everything goes in and out on time," Smith said.

When the site was first constructed and became operational, Smith worked every hour the

terminal operated. These days things have settled down enough, and the staff is familiar enough with operations, that she's able to work a more normal workday.

When not on the job, Smith has found a new hobby. Inspired by the number of bikes she's seen on the road in her most northern home to date, she decided to take a class and get a license. Now she is the proud owner of a Harley Davidson motorcycle, and her bike is her social escape. She stops periodically on her joy rides to check her Blackberry for the calls and emails that prove the terminal is running smoothly in her absence.

Had she envisioned one day actually playing a part in real trains leaving the terminal on time, after hours of lying on the attic floor making model trains come and go?

"It was not a conscious decision (to grow up and work for the railroad)," Smith said. "Intermodal seems to be the best of all worlds to me. It's something different every day."

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