



## INFORM, INSPIRE, AND MOTIVATE *with* LAURA CROUCH

DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY RELATIONS, LOCAL GOVERNMENT, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
TAMPA ELECTRIC – PEOPLES GAS

### What inspired you to join the energy industry?

When I was preparing for college and deciding what I wanted to study, my father (a high school teacher and coach) suggested that I consider electrical engineering. We had a family friend who had graduated from USF with an electrical engineering degree, and she later went to work for Tampa Electric. He loved the idea of a smart woman in a challenging field and thought the energy industry held so much opportunity for a lifelong career. He also thought it was cool that she had learned to climb power poles!

Initially, I wasn't especially keen on his idea. I had been the editor of my high school yearbook and loved literature – engineering did not sound like the plan for me. But as I started taking classes, I discovered that I had an affinity for math and science that, until then, I hadn't tapped into. I really enjoyed the challenging coursework and began to pursue a degree in chemical engineering. During my last semester, I had the opportunity to intern with Tampa Electric's environmental department and that is when it all started coming together. It was my first opportunity to apply my degree to the work I could be doing. It was challenging and rewarding – learning how to work within the various regulations and permits, while balancing the needs of operations – looking for win-win solutions. Through this experience, I was able to see that the energy industry provides virtually unlimited opportunities for continuous learning and growth. It got me excited about what my future and career might look like.

During my career at Tampa Electric, I have worked in environmental, regulatory, generation planning, policy, strategy, and now community relations. While I haven't learned to climb a power pole yet, I have been to the top of the 500-foot tall stacks at the Big Bend power plant. I am pretty sure that would have impressed my Dad!

### Can you tell us about your current role?

Currently, I am Director of Community Relations, Local Government and Economic Development for the Tampa/I-4 region of Tampa Electric and Peoples Gas. In this role, my team and I work to represent the company in the communities we serve – everything from franchise agreements to project outreach to support of community initiatives and resolving community concerns. Our team serves as the eyes and ears of the company, and bringing the outside view into our internal decision making is our primary mission. We want to be certain that the priorities of the communities we serve are our priorities as well. We also want to make sure that the communities we serve are aware of our activities and able to provide input – essentially a feedback loop.

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*“Challenge yourself to look for solutions where others don't see them.”*

**Generally, when people think of careers in the utility sector, they may think “engineer,” “line worker,” or “customer service representative.” Your role is a unique one. Can you tell us about the significance of your role in the energy industry, especially as it pertains to the growth of our economy?**

We are an energy partner in our region’s growth and a contributor to an innovative community culture. Through construction of renewable energy projects, grid modernization, transitioning to LED/smart street lighting and storm hardening – among other things – we are making our region more appealing to business. Attracting new companies and helping current companies to expand clearly helps the local economy grow and makes for a vibrant community. We work with leaders in our community and in economic development to provide a complete picture to a prospective company of our community’s business climate.

**Please describe to us your journey in arriving where you are now. What is an idea, a motto, an insight, a person, or an experience that you feel has motivated you along the way?**

My primary driver has been wanting to be involved in projects and topics that are impactful to my company and interesting to me. I want to make a difference when I come to work, and I want to leave things better than I found them. I also had a lot of good advice and mentoring along the way. Working in the energy industry, there is no shortage of challenging opportunities. Looking at the career paths of people who were respected for their knowledge and whom I admired was motivational along the way. I would look for opportunities to gain similar experiences – through environmental, regulatory, generation planning, policy and strategy – in areas where you learn what drives the business. Moving into community and government relations and being able to use all that I have learned to identify partnerships and connections between our company and the community has really been exciting.

*“Be open to opportunities to put on a hard hat, safety glasses and steel-toed boots – the time spent at the plants and out in the field – working with plant engineers and project managers will help you communicate, put issues in context and paint a picture of what is going on in our world to others.”*

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**Many experiences have a “click” moment. In the course of your career, can you recall a particular moment when it truly clicked for you that energy is the place to be?**

This is funny, but I always think of the moment that I spoke to my older son’s Pre-Kindergarten class. I went with my hard hat, steel-toed boots, and safety glasses. I also had my TECO shirt on as well. After talking to them about power plants and bucket trucks, I left to go back to work. I later found out that the class had started referring to me as Electric Girl – which made me feel like a bit of a superhero! It also felt on the mark, so that was when I knew energy was the place for me.

**What is the most memorable lesson or skill that you have learned in the energy industry?**

Two skills that have really made a difference for me were learning to act both as a translator and a problem solver. Conveying our story to external stakeholders and bringing their story back in to the company to create a common solution. Let’s be honest, the energy industry is full of engineers who are very straightforward and logic driven – and regulation does not always seem logical to them. Being able to translate the technical aspects of the engineer’s operational needs to regulators and vice versa creates a much more workable negotiating position. Being able to problem solve through difficulties and achieve workable, lasting solutions is key, too. Common to both is really listening to what the parties are saying and working to have those needs met.

### **What do you look forward to most in the work that you do?**

Connecting my company to the communities we serve; telling our story; understanding how we can work together; being creative; innovative partnerships; and collaboration.

One of my favorite collaborative projects was working with Innovation Place (USF Area Innovation District), Hillsborough Area Regional Transit (HART) Authority, and Tesla on HART's HyperLink service - a ride sharing-like service where users will be able to hire a Tesla Model X to get them from their bus stop to their final location. Bringing together a community need, an innovative approach and cutting edge electric vehicles was a really rewarding experience.

### **What is a challenge that you have been proud to see the industry overcome?**

Recently, our industry and communities really came together on the Hurricane Irma recovery efforts. It was a dramatic showing of how hard the people in our industry work and how much they care about their communities. So many people pitching in and doing completely different "storm duty" jobs from their normal assignments. Nothing makes me prouder than seeing convoys of bucket trucks coming into the state and amassing at incident bases. We had linemen from as far away as Emera Nova Scotia working in our service territory. It was truly a monumental effort and while there are always things to work on, it is one challenge we should collectively be proud of as well.

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### **What is a special area of opportunity that you see in energy?**

For Tampa Electric, I see many opportunities being brought through our acquisition by Emera. Being part of a larger company with diverse experiences and knowledge has really expanded our strategic planning and technology selection processes. Being exposed to new ways of thinking and having fresh voices as part of the process is energizing. I am also very excited with the recent announcement of Nancy Tower as Tampa Electric's President and CEO. I met Nancy when the Emera transaction was first announced in 2015 and she is a caring and collaborative leader. She is committed to our community and carrying on the long standing traditions of Tampa Electric. I look forward to working with her as she gets involved in the energy industry at the local and state level. She will be an asset to both Tampa Electric and Florida.

### **How do strong community relations support the opportunity and growth that the energy industry promises?**

Being tuned in to our communities ensures that we are growing in ways that support their vision for the region, including their desire for cleaner energy and innovation. As our communities grow, we need to understand how we can be a part of that and how we can support them as well.

### **What advice would you give to other women who aspire to join the energy industry, especially on the communications and development side?**

The best advice I can give is to start with a solid, versatile degree in engineering or another equally challenging field that you love. Learning how to think and problem-solve is a skill that will carry you through. Beyond this, learn the business from as many angles as you can. Understand the drivers. Be open to opportunities to put on a hard hat, safety glasses and steel-toed boots – the time spent at the plants and out in the field – working with plant engineers and project managers will help you communicate, put issues in context and paint a picture of what is going on in our world to others. Challenge yourself to look for solutions where others don't see them. This is a great industry with innovation happening daily. If you have the magic skill set that includes technical knowledge and the ability to communicate, your opportunities are endless.

Describe the energy industry using one word, and share with us why you chose this word.

***“VIBRANT.”***

I believe this describes the industry as it is now – an industry that is evolving, perhaps being disrupted by emerging technologies, responding to changing customer expectations, renewable opportunities.

The annual Florida's Women in Energy Leadership Forum (FWELF) aims to promote opportunities in the energy industry by recognizing the success that women leaders in the energy industry have demonstrated in growing Florida's economy and diversifying an already tremendous workforce.

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