



INFORM, INSPIRE, AND MOTIVATE with SHANNON PIERCE

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SOUTHERN COMPANY GAS

What inspired you to join the energy industry?

Like many in this wonderful industry, I did not go looking for it—it found me. As a new associate with a law firm, I was assigned to the Energy & Utilities team. I was apprehensive, but 17-years later, I am so thankful that I trusted the H.R. director who told me that I would love the team and the work. Natural gas plays such an important role in the energy industry right now. It promotes an efficient and effective energy mix and ensures the reliability of other electricity sources. While this industry was initially chosen for me, all the exciting things going on and the important role energy plays in society definitely keeps me in this industry.

Can you tell us about your current role?

A wholly owned subsidiary of Southern Company, Southern Company Gas is America's largest natural gas-only distribution company. We have a 160-year track record of reliability. I am responsible for regulatory and governmental affairs for three of the company's seven gas utilities: Atlanta Gas Light, Chattanooga Gas and Florida City Gas. I also lead the company's interactions with Georgia's retail natural gas marketers. I lead a team of regulatory, governmental and economic development professionals who serve as key strategic advisors to our utility leaders and who are engaged in the formulation of regulatory and governmental affairs solutions and strategies designed to achieve the goals and objectives of the company.

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

I have benefitted from the empowerment, support and sponsorship of industry leaders—both inside my company and externally—who have given me opportunities to take on new roles and responsibilities that have given me very broad experience. I did not always seek these opportunities and at times I was not sure I was ready, but the faith and confidence that others have had in me motivated me to keep pushing to learn and do more. This great fortune of mine inspires me daily to do the same for others.

Last year at the Florida Women's Leadership Conference, I served on a panel with some extraordinary women leaders in the industry. At the request of the moderator, we each created a, "personal brand statement" that has become a motto that helps to guide my daily professional decisions. Here is my statement: I am a relationship-building, results-oriented leader who strives to continuously grow my character and influence positive change through a spirit of service to others.

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What advice would you give to other women who aspire to join the energy industry, especially those with a legal background? How can they best contribute to the industry?

Take advantage of programs and organizations that are available to help you learn more about the industry, what it has to offer and to connect with professionals in the industry. Some great programs and organizations that have been beneficial to me include: The Florida Women’s Energy Leadership Forum, of course, the Energy Bar Association (national and regional programs), Women in Energy, and American Association of Blacks in Energy. I encourage those with a legal background to be open to opportunities outside of the core legal function as our skills and the way we communicate, identify and analyze issues can certainly transfer to other aspects of the business. All in all, legal is certainly a great entry into this field.

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 you belong in this industry and could see your future in this profession?

About four years into my career, I was at a federal agency in a meeting room with about 50 people discussing the services being rendered by a particular energy company. Two things clicked for me:

1. While 50 people at one meeting sounds like a lot, we were discussing issues that would impact the quality of the daily lives of millions of people and I was one of the small number of people with the opportunity to contribute to the success of the process.
2. I was with my boss who happens to also be a GEN Xer and a minority. He looked at the room that was definitely not filled with GEN Xers, minorities or women and said, “Wow, look at this room. We have a great opportunity.”

From that point on, I knew that I wanted to grow with this industry. I wanted to learn all I could to have a seat at the table and to contribute to the future of this industry in a meaningful way.

As a workforce participant in the natural gas industry, do you see opportunities for you that may not exist elsewhere in energy?

While there are so many opportunities in all facets of the industry, the natural gas industry is uniquely positioned for growth and opportunity given its abundance, relatively low price, and its role as a bridge fuel as it relates to the environment. When I started in the energy industry, natural gas was not the hot topic that it is today. In particular, the focus on developing natural gas infrastructure creates a wealth of career opportunities.

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What are some exciting things on the horizon in the natural gas industry that may create opportunities for the next generation of workforce talent?

Infrastructure development, including modernizing and improving existing gas infrastructure, is essential to our being able to fully leverage the abundance of natural gas supplies in this country. The industry will need engineering, construction and environmental professionals, regulatory, governmental and communications experts, lawyers, accountants and financial analysts, and project managers—in both the government and private sectors – to get it done. The work will not stop once these assets are constructed. We will need the most talented energy professionals to operate, maintain and continue to enhance the facilities to ensure that our customers receive the most responsive, reliable service possible.

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

The most important skills are being able to build relationships and collaborate. I have learned so much about this very dynamic industry by learning from those who have seen this industry evolve, especially over the last 20-years. Collaboration with key internal and external stakeholders has been essential to my team’s ability to help our company achieve outcomes for the benefit of our customers, communities and shareholders.

In your current role, you have helped the company transition through several acquisitions, what would you share about lessons learned?

I now have been on both sides of the acquisition table, having been a part of a company that grew through acquisitions and most recently that company having been acquired. There are unique lessons on each side of the table, but the common lesson I have learned is that while the changes that occur may be out of my control, I can control my response and how I adapt to change. I can choose to be negative about the disruption or I can choose to see and accept the opportunity for personal and professional growth.

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

“INNOVATIVE.”

Early in my career as I contemplated my future in the industry and the company, a former manager used to tell me that “we are not the sleepy old utility company anymore.” He was certainly right. The issues we deal with are complex and our impact on society and the economy is significant. With our customer needs changing, our industry has had no choice but to be creative in determining how we can better serve our customers and our communities. This includes not only innovating through technology and enhancing the customer experience but developing innovative regulatory programs as well. And with our challenge of an aging workforce, we have had to rethink our methods for recruiting and retaining talent so that the next generation workforce will enhance our thinking by bringing its own creative ideas to the table in our dynamic industry.

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.