

## **Women on the Leading Edge (from Nova Scotia Community College Student Success Magazine 2009)**

"Cosmetology is upstairs." These were the first words that Kristy Waalderbos heard when she entered the Welding classroom at NSCC's Pictou campus in 2006. They were uttered by one of her male classmates and they lit a fire inside Kristy. "I remember thinking: 'I'll prove you wrong in a few days. Just put a welder in my hand.' I knew what I was there for and no one could turn me back." Two years later, Kristy graduated at the top of her class and served as campus Valedictorian.

It all started in the 4-H program where Kristy first learned about welding. Her dairy farmer father then coached her on technique at home. "I loved it right away," she says. "I've always enjoyed working with my hands."

Rather than applying to university, as her sisters had done before her, Christy decided to pursue welding as a career. "I checked out NSCC before I applied and I felt welcome right away. The instructors and the staff made me feel at home." Christy was fortunate to receive a national scholarship called the Garfield Weston designed to recognize outstanding college-bound students. The scholarship paid her tuition and her summer work experience in the Netherlands.

In 2008, welding diploma in hand, Kristy launched right into a related NSCC program - Welding Inspection Quality Control. "It gives me a double-trade in a sense," says the 21-year-old. "It can be very attractive to companies who may need both a welder and a welding inspector."

When she wasn't studying this past year, Kristy travelled to high schools around the province talking to high school-aged girls. "More women are becoming involved in the trades and it's up to us to get the word out there," she says. "These girls need to hear our experiences and our success stories."

Erin Jennings couldn't agree more. As the first woman in the Atlantic Provinces to purchase a funeral home independently, with no prior family involvement, Erin has become a role model to scores of women graduating into the field.

The 35-year-old owner of the J. Albert Walker Funeral Home in Spryfield believes that women bring a unique perspective to what was once a male-dominated industry. "It used to be taboo for a woman to do this, but as more women enter the profession, employers are realizing what an asset we are to this line of work." Women are natural caregivers, says Erin. "I can extend a hug or a kiss on the cheek. I cry with my families. I laugh with my families."

It was while working in a cemetery selling burial plots that Erin first got an inkling that she might be called to this work. "And that's what it is to me – a calling – very much like a clergy or a doctor," she says. These feelings led her to volunteer at a funeral home and then enroll in the Funeral Services Program at NSCC. "I didn't choose this profession. It chose me," she says. "I loved it right away and I've never looked back."

Ironically, it was Erin's own father's death and life insurance funds that made it possible for her to achieve the dream of owning her own funeral home. "If my Dad hadn't died at age 59, I wouldn't be here right now," she says. "So all of my work within these four

walls is his legacy. I feel like I carry my father around on my shoulder every day and that's what motivates me to do right by the families I serve."

Treating each individual and each family as if they were her own is Erin's trademark. It makes for a consuming career. "I'm lucky to have family support because I'm literally married to my work. I can't count the number of birthdays, weddings, holidays, and vacations I've missed because of being dedicated to this trade."

For Erin, knowing that she's helping people makes it all worthwhile. "It's a great feeling when I can help someone get through the worst thing they'll ever experience in their life. If I can make that easier in some small way, I'm happy."

Erin also goes to great lengths to welcome more women into the field, offering work placements to NSCC students and employing NSCC graduates. In addition, she gives out the Women of Excellence Funeral Service Award at the annual graduation banquet. "I'm really proud of the women in this industry and I want to support them."

(737 words)