

WHAT!! MUM GOT A TRAINEESHIP
BUT SHE'S NEARLY 50!!!!!!!



Paper Presented by:

Sally-Ann Storey

Author:

Sally-Ann Storey, Trainee Water & Wastewater Operations,

Toowoomba Regional Council



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Sally-Ann Storey, *Trainee Water & Wastewater Operations*, Toowoomba Regional Council

ABSTRACT

This paper is written a little 'tongue in cheek' and I hope it is taken with the light hearted spirit it has been intended. I would ask that you indulge me and try to recall your initiation into the industry or even your first job and enjoy this brief overview of my experience.

DISCLAIMER

All names have been omitted (bar a few) due to confidentiality and references made have no bearing on their identity. Should anyone correlate any tale to the identity, I have been assured that they will deny, deny, deny.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

My name is Sally Storey and I applied for a 2 year Traineeship in Cert III Water & Wastewater Operations with Toowoomba Regional Council in January 2014. I was most fortunate to secure an interview for the position at the end of that month. I presented and was interviewed by the Facility Coordinator and 2 Senior Operators. A jug of water and glass were placed before me with one operator encouraging me to take a drink whilst assuring me it was non-alcoholic and potable – oh dear – here we go!!

With high hopes I completed the process but those hopes were dashed when I walked out of the interview room and saw a young man about 18 years old obviously the next applicant waiting to go in. My heart sank, why would they give the Traineeship to an old woman as opposed to a strapping young lad? I wished him good luck before I raced to my car to say my prayers.

2.0 GOOD NEWS

Imagine my elation when the call came through to present for a medical! My opportunity at last, to brag the news, to my family, who were none the wiser of my application. Their raucous laughter at the thought of their mother starting a Traineeship at her age!! The sewerage jokes flew thick and fast literally for a very long month. In order to curtail their bawdy humour I was able to convince them that everything in Council is confidential and I had signed a clause binding me to that and anyway sewerage is a highly skilled secret business supported by the fact that our facility has a high fence and is secured by an electronic gate with a passcode known only to staff ("wait a minute Mum – you copied that off Charlie and the Chocolate Factory didn't you Mum?"- no comment – everything on Council is confidential).

3.0 IN THE BEGINNING

Kitted out with all new clothing the shiny pin officially starts at Wetalla. Introductions complete – down to business. Then I overhead someone mention the WASs. Naturally I thought, oh, 2 more blokes to meet; they must be called Warren or something like that.

I had just met a fellow named Wayne so I wouldn't want to mix them up and create a bad impression on the first day now would I? Imagine my sheer embarrassment when I realised the WASs were the abbreviation for 2xWaste Activated Sludge Tanks!! Best keep that one to myself I thought.

4.0 COMPETITION

On an occasion, Wetalla were hosting a Work Place Health & Safety event and this being my first there was a bit to take in considering the other regions joined us for the event. Following the presentation we were enjoying generous refreshments in the lunch room and I was mingling (as you do), when a tap on the window caught my attention. To my delight, a group of our younger team members were gathered outside and one particular boy was beckoning me to come outside. "Sal, Sal" he called and motioned me with hand signals. Heart pounding, as I tried to cut through the crowd calmly and ubar confidently sashaying my way past when I really wanted to push them aside like I was making a sprint for the finishing line!

Wow, I thought, I've made it, I'm fitting in and someone remembers my name – who cares if he only wants me to get him some more sandwiches, I'll do it. I approached him outside and with all his boyish charm he whispered to me "Sal, Sal who's that hottie you are talking to in there? As I gave out the details of that "hottie" being one of the Trainees who commenced with me but was assigned to another section, his face changed from hope to frown to a resigned crumple – oh why couldn't we have gotten her instead of you? (Note to self – a bit of lippie tomorrow and double the deodorant – that's the least I could do).

5.0 DA BIBLE/QUESTIONNAIRE MAN

Following that near miss, I thought it best that I purchase a notebook. Yes, good idea, maybe even a big diary where I could take down notes after all there is a lot to learn and take in here. Armed with the biggest one I could find, I fronted up to work with it – thus Da Bible was born. Although it took me some time to realise it but many an accomplished Operator took the sight of me coming towards them with this pink binder as their cue to flee with great haste to any conceivable crack or crevice handy in which to escape and hide! Notwithstanding this, seasoned Operators were suddenly taking unscheduled Long Service Leave, non-urgent, pre-existing medical conditions suddenly took on inexplicable immediacies; accrued leave magically appeared from nowhere and had to be taken at once.

The corner shop commented on a rise in cigarette sales and those reformed smokers suddenly resumed the habit! Funny place, this Wetalla, surely nothing to do with me asking the same questions once or twice – ok maybe more!



6.0 POLYMER

Another day, another whip around the plant, making observations, asking questions and taking notes. Up to the facilities belt pressing system where I had plenty to ask. Following a series of questions (ok a barrage!) one Operator began to explain the virtues of Polymer. As he explained its qualities, I noted a distinct twinkle in his eye as he then went on to rub a sample between his fingers and state that it was brilliant as a hair conditioner for women and urged me to try it! Really, did he think I was a bit silly, whatever gave him that impression! I was born in 1964 not 2004! Being 50 has its advantages.

7.0 SACRIFICIAL ANODE

The Traineeship continues, no two days the same. Days out on Pump Stations, days at Wetalla, days with the Fitters & Turners including me wherever possible, days in town for training. On one particular afternoon, an Operator could see I was struggling and a little overwhelmed with the mechanical side of things, so took me aside to explain the Sacrificial Anode. I swallowed hard and thought oh no! a closet religious Operator and no-one gave me the heads up – wish I'd have listened harder when I was in Sunday School but I think I remember something about that from church! You will be relieved to know I am now ofay with Sacrificial Anodes!

8.0 SNAKE SIGNS

Though all the hands on training and TAFE books took on a life of their own, I was nominated as the Health & Safety Representative for Wetalla (yes, little old me! Who said no-one else wanted to do it, don't listen to rumours!). Whilst in Brisbane at TAFE for exam block we were taken on several excursions to other plants. Whilst on these tours, I observed Beware of Snakes signs strategically positioned around these plants. As I was most fortunate to have a female partner in crime with me (who literally saved my bacon and steadied the waters for me on more than one occasion at Wetalla) I ran it past her. Naturally she urged me to put it forward at the next appropriate meeting once back at work.

Just to explain, Wetalla is situated between our city's waste dump and Gowrie Creek so it is a thoroughfare for snakes and occasionally a work colleague or truck driver would see one and alert us. Full of ambition and gusto I put my case for signs forward – to my horror I was laughed down with the logic being that we would need a sign for everything! I was deflated but keep insisting (well maybe nagging) and when all my reasoning was exhausted, I exclaimed “Well how are you going to remember me when I'm finished and gone?” How could anyone oppose such sensible rational and logic? They gave in and I got the signs and of course, they work, we haven't seen a snake since!



9.0 THE VILES

My introduction to the lab was swift. I was buddied up with an experienced staff member. Right from the start, he took no prisoners. He unequivocally stated that he was only going to tell me once so pay attention (best tell him NOW that I have lots of children and paying attention is what I do and this one needs a bit of work). Oh, thought too soon, my first attempt to test NO₃ and NH₄ was disastrous – contents uneven from vile to vile, panic now firmly established, I shook like a leaf when inconsistent results showed again.

In sheer frustration he exclaimed “That’s never happened before! - Re-test!” (Heard that before). Unimpressed, he hovered, scrutinising my every movement. Improved results, a sigh of relief (everything is easy when you know how). Just when I started to get a pulse back, he began to calculate the monetary cost of my failures. I was mortified, there’s not a lot of room for financial error as an \$11/hour trainee. Mortified, I somehow mustered the courage to face the Operators collectively and offer to pay for the vials. They roared with laughter and generously explained that this was expected of a Trainee. The humility extended to me that day was to sustain me when I was to encounter many more failures at Wetalla. (Note to self – try harder tomorrow).

10.0 THE SIEVES

As you know, a 3 month probationary period has to be passed, so considering my history to date I was a little nervous when called into the Boss’ office. Euphoria! Signed off – success! This calls for celebration (I’ll pick up a bottle of Passion Pop maybe even Trevi on the way home – good idea. This poor man’s champagne makes for great entertainment as you watch your children roll on the lounge room floor in hysterics as you toast “Wetalla” – they would want to hope that I don’t put it on UTube!).

How short lived my success! The following day began as usual, duties assigned, off I went with my colleague to what we refer to on the plant as the sieves. The procedure involves manually removing the sieve for cleaning. The final waste (namely fruit stickers and waste of plastic ear cleaning sticks) is captured in a wire frame that we refer to as the sieve. A large metal hook is used to manually lift this frame over the railing, we proceed to hose it out and return via the same procedure.

All going well until I swung round and accidentally knocked the frame into the channel. In utter disbelief, I watch in horror as it slowly sank – it and my career of 3 months and 1 day disappearing before my very eyes. I wheeled around to work mate who had by this stage turned a ghastly green. (Expletive) That’s never happened before (that oh so familiar phase) **YOU** are going to have to go and tell the Operator. I grabbed the railing to steady myself – should I dive in to retrieve it or do a runner and hitchhike into town (not smart – stay dignified – dignified! Am I even breathing!).

Up to the Administration Building, every step a moonwalk, my head pounding, what if I plead with him that a low flying helicopter startled me and that’s how it fell into the channel (no, I think one of my kids used an excuse like that when he tackled his 2 brothers into a wall so hard that Great Great Great Great Grandma’s vase fell from the shelf and shattered. No something more mature and fathomable, thinking thinking, too late already there!). Here comes one of the boys on the forklift maybe he can save me. Noting my distress, he pulled up and asked me what was wrong?

WHAT'S WRONG!! I blurted out and every female knows when all else fails, time to pull out all stops and sob inconsolably. He managed to piece together what had happened and reassured me that he would phone the Operator in charge if I just calmed down! He reached for his mobile phone, dialled the number and proceeded to go into his own toxic shock, sweating profusely and scratching every part of his anatomy at the sound of the Operator's voice. There we were both at the bottom of the steps, each suffering our own hysteria.

Lucky him I thought as he took off leaving me in a cloud of diesel smoke. Time to go ugly early – apologise profusely and offer to resign. The Operator calmly stated that if we couldn't fish it out we would drain the channel. Drain the channel! Did I hear right! (Should have done a runner). Now to a 3 month Trainee, drain the channel conjures up visions of sewerage backing up in homes across Toowoomba, headlines in the Toowoomba Chronicle – “Aging Trainee to blame for Bog”. No time for wallowing, the Operators sprung into action. Now down the steps of the Admin block (where I'm still standing frozen on the spot!) comes our resident cleaner – thank goodness I think – she's a female – she would have done a few things wrong – surely!

Now you have to know our cleaner, she is a bit of a larrikin, well known and loved for her expletives which are well intended but unleashed at extraordinary and dare I say inappropriate times. So I gave her a quick brief on the situation, she lurched into a bear hug and said no-one got up you, did they? “No thank goodness” I replied with that she exploded into uncontrolled laughter, slapped me hard between the shoulder blades and exclaimed “Well thank such and such John signed your probation yesterday and not today!!” Roaring laughing, off she went. Heading off back to the crime scene where a small army had gathered, I was forced to recount the tale of my clumsiness to work mates over and over with some grinning some rolling eyes and some just shaking their heads. With chains, ropes, hooks every apparatus remotely connected to fishing appearing, the best of Wetalla tried their hand.



With no immediate success time to open the valve to drop the water in the channel and perservere with trying to hook the frame. Suddenly, my knight in shining armour (or should I say PPE) appeared with a modified version of the hook we were using.

Within minutes, that sweet sieve was to the surface. My mouth so dry I could only manage an applause and hug and a 750ml bottle of Bundy that I went to purchase in my lunch hour. He still hasn't forgiven me – the only trouble is I'm not sure whether it's because of the hug or he thought the reward was worth a 1ltr bottle and not a 750ml!

11.0 CONCLUSION

Without doubt, the past 12 months at Wetalla has been not only the most interesting, fulfilling year of my 35 year working life but the happiest. I have made mistakes, allowed to realise them and supported to correct them. Work mates have helped me, laughed at and me, and cried for me. I am a mature age female with an unlikely background for this industry and I recall a phone call from a previous boss asking me to return to her employment – at the time I was passing our Preliminary Treatment Area and the sour pungent odour wafted under the heat of the summer sun – a momentary thought back to an old job in familiar territory, a no brainer - I declined.

I would urge anyone, particularly female, with even the most modest of interest and knowledge of the industry to disregard your age and try your hand. Put your finances in order, roll up your sleeves and do what you have to achieve results – the rewards supersede your imagination!!

Another 12 months of the Traineeship to go, brace yourself Wetalla!!

12.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance and good humour of the staff at Wetalla in the compilation of this document.