I want to share a little bit about me as a young engineer and a mum. It is something that I am proud of and hope that I am a positive influence on others in my role as the Chair of YIPWEAQ.

“Normal” – Conforming to a standard, usual, typical or expected.

This is what I thought of myself until late last year when I really started to reflect on my journey so far. It made me think about where I came from, where I have been and what I have achieved. I have had many light bulb moments along the way but it was the simplest thing that I learnt about myself that completely changed my way of thinking.

I was born in 1987, 1 of 16.3 million people in Australia. I grew up in a loving, sport crazy, academically-determined family and could not resist a challenge. I went to school at North Bundaberg State High and soon realised that if there was a problem, I was in the midst of it looking for the solution. My heart was set on engineering so in 2005 I went to CQU University to study for a Bachelor of Engineering (Co-op) and Diploma of Professional Practice.

At the end of 2006 I was fortunate (not that I knew how much at the time) to receive a scholarship with the Calliope Shire Council and commenced work while studying. I had some incredible opportunities and some really stinky ones (and I mean literally stinky!) This is where my passion for mentoring comes from as I am forever grateful to the mentors I have had over the years and continue to have. In July 2009, I graduated with honours and became 1 of 323,000 people with engineering qualifications.

Then the real world began...

My view of the ‘real world’ and myself at this point was: young, passionate, need to work hard (but not too hard), career driven, get ‘stuff’, knowledgeable, learn anything and everything, invincible, going places, grown up.

I graduated with full time employment at Gladstone Regional Council (post amalgamation). I was then 1 of 255,000 employed engineers although the female ratio was extremely low. On a positive note though, this is improving – in 2006, only 10.6% of engineers were female compared to 11.8% in 2011.

I married my high school sweetheart in September 2009 and this made me 1 of 125,000 married employed engineers. As a recent graduate, I never missed an opportunity with training, new jobs, site visits, on the shovel, you name it I was there. I was moved from water, sewer, roads, design, then to infrastructure planning and it was great!
However my view of the ‘real world’ was challenged and I quickly started to realise (light bulb moment #1) that:

- I was knowledgeable only about university ‘stuff’
- I had to work harder than I ever thought I would have
- I was not as invincible as I thought – lots of engineer jokes came my way which was character building!
- I still had a lot of growing up to do
- ‘Stuff’ costs a lot of money

In spite of all that, I was doing well. It seems that engineers have a drive and need to succeed which is possibly why 83.2% of graduate engineers (average over 2009-2014) prefer full time work compared to 63.5% of all graduates in Australia.

I developed a real passion for strategic infrastructure planning. I was energised, challenged and fascinated by computer models of water and sewer networks. I found my feet as a graduate engineer and I was kicking goals. Like most, I was ambitious and I wanted more including to supervise our small Infrastructure Planning team so I worked as hard as I could to impress those above me.

And then came baby #1, Miss Isla, born July 2011. This made me 1 of 77,750 married employed engineers with kid(s). Isla was a beautiful surprise but at the time I thought, “kids won’t change me”, “I am still a career women” and “this mum stuff will be easy and it will be good to have a break from work”. O.M.G. - how wrong I was!

I was approved for 12 months maternity leave however I craved mental stimulation and found it difficult to keep up to date in the engineering world with a very needy baby. Then I was offered my dream position of Senior Engineer of the Infrastructure Planning Team and returned to work early negotiating part-time hours.

My view of the ‘real world’ had not changed much - my career was still a high priority however I now had a child to raise too. Easy right?

I returned to work in May 2012, in the midst of Gladstone’s biggest boom seen to date. There were LNG plants everywhere, a new coal terminal and extensions to major industries in the region.

Development – commercial and residential was happening EVERYWHERE! My team were ensuring the water, sewer, traffic, stormwater strategies were being implemented and that required infrastructure was being placed in the ground. Models had to be rerun to reflect the rapid changes occurring every day and new strategies were being developed where development was so different to what was planned. It was HECTIC!

My work/life balance was very ordinary. I was classed as part-time but continuously worked full-time hours to try and keep up with the demands of the role. I had some momentous internal challenges to deal with also:

- I had to update myself with the engineering industry.
- My new position meant a lot of new skills had to be learnt.
- I was part-time but working full-time or longer hours.
- I had to learn to juggle being an engineer and a mum.
- My passion started to fade.
- My family started to suffer.
- My work/life balance was nonexistent.

Then came my Light Bulb Moment #2. Reality Check!

- I had my priorities wrong.
I had my balance wrong.

So in July 2013 I stepped back from being a senior engineer to an engineering position. This was a huge decision and one that left many people wondering about my sanity. But it was right for me at that time and I was finally able to put my family first and relegate work to #2. A huge weight was lifted and whilst I was still acting as Senior Engineer in most regards, I knew my limitations no matter how guilty I felt. Over the next year, I witnessed a restructure and position change and was suddenly thrown into learning all about development assessment which was daunting and challenging but a wonderful opportunity.

It wasn’t long before Baby #2, Mr Will entered the world and again I was on maternity leave struggling with not being mentally stimulated. However, this time I stayed in touch with the engineering world which made it a lot easier. I negotiated new part-time work hours to suit my family and returned to work early, again in February 2015. I was a fish out of water in my new development role but I was starting to kick some goals and the passion returned, finally!

I was balanced but full speed ahead.

And I am 1 of 9,200 female married employed engineers with kids - that's 3% of engineers in Australia. At this point, my view of the 'real world' and myself had definitely changed:

I am youngish, passionate, need to work hard, career is important but not everything, I only get necessary 'stuff', I am somewhat knowledgeable, learn anything and everything, not invincible, going places, growing up slowly.

I was comfortable however that I still had a sense of guilt that I was letting my work colleagues down and not contributing enough as work was no longer my #1 priority. I asked myself, “Is this normal?” and “Am I normal”. I certainly didn’t think I was conforming to a standard or what was expected but it made more sense to me when I looked at the antonyms of ‘normal’ – different, extraordinary, rare, unusual, exceptional, extreme, eccentric or unconventional.

Then I started to wonder if anyone is really ‘normal’ - I don’t think so. I may not be extraordinary but I am certainly different and at times unconventional and that is perfectly OK! It is OK to not be normal. It is OK to take a step back in your career. It is OK to have a break. It is OK to be part-time; that doesn’t make me less of an engineer or less of a professional. But most importantly, it is OK to put your family first!

My guilt is gone (mostly) however my passion is stronger than ever. I hope by sharing my journey that it helps those girls in high school considering a career as an engineer and those recent graduates or soon to be graduates. My message is not just for mums or even just for women – it is for anyone struggling with their work/life balance. Please take a moment to really think about your priorities, reflect on what opportunities change can offer you but most importantly, don’t be afraid to live!

Cheers
Celisa Faulkner

Congratulations IPWEAQ Ambassador, Jessica Kahl!

We are very proud of our Ambassador, Jessica Kahl who successfully launched a series of Dream Big projects in Rockhampton, Gladstone, Bundaberg and Mackay to encourage female high school students to consider a career in engineering. Jessica’s report is published on page 38 of this issue of Engineering for Public Works