

SPECIAL SERIES



BREAKING GROUND

A Spotlight on Six Women in the U.S. Environmental Industry

JENNIFER GILLEN

FROM INTERNSHIP TO INDUSTRY IMPACT

Jennifer's career shows how growth, grit, and vision can transform opportunity into influence.



In 2009, the world was reeling from a major recession. Amid that uncertainty, Jennifer Gillen embarked on a job search that would shape her career. That search led her to an internship at LaBella Associates, where 17 years later, she now leads the company's Environmental Services Division.

The Early Years

Jennifer knew from her 9th-grade Earth Science class that she was interested in landforms and wanted to understand why things looked the way they do. From that point on, she pursued her passion through undergraduate and master's degree programs in Geological Sciences at the University of Albany in New York.

While attending university, Jennifer found inspiration from a professor, Dr. John Delano, whose discussions of urban geochemistry, contamination, and toxicology rekindled her early passion for understanding the environment and the world around her. After her first semester in college, with

her mother's encouragement, she reached out to Professor Delano, who facilitated a research position on a NASA-funded project studying the impact history of the Earth-Moon system. Lessons learned on this project empowered her to keep asking why (and why not) and had an instrumental impact on the arc of her career.

Career Path

When Jennifer joined LaBella Associates in 2009 as an intern, her work focused on Phase I assessments and fieldwork. Over time, her role expanded alongside the firm's significant growth from approximately 100 employees to more than 2,000, with offices now in 40 cities primarily along the East Coast. Today, she leads a team of more than 300 employees across four departments within the Environmental Services Division, including Environmental Due Diligence and Investigative Remediation, Environmental Construction, Ecological Permitting and Compliance, and Utility Program

Management. In this role, Jennifer manages and oversees the firm's environmental consulting and construction projects, builds client partnerships, develops new service offerings, and supports LaBella's expansion into new geographic territories.

The entrepreneurial culture at LaBella Associates, along with opportunities for business growth, personal development, and expansion into new markets, continues to motivate Jennifer. "Things don't get stale," she said.

On a personal level, she also credits her previous supervisor with providing consistent support throughout her career. "He has believed in me more than I believed in myself. He really helped build my confidence."

In her leadership role at LaBella, one of Jennifer's primary responsibilities is to ensure the team has "cool projects" to work on, while maintaining a casual environment. "We don't take ourselves too seriously — and I think that, combined with our entrepreneurial attitude and exceptional teams, is what makes us successful," asserted Jennifer.



The Best Part of Her Job

As a Senior VP, Jennifer is less involved in day-to-day technical work than she once was, and, ironically, as a self-proclaimed introvert, she now finds the greatest fulfillment in working with people — getting to know their personality traits, mentoring and coaching, building strong relationships, and collaborating on teams. This personal evolution has led her to think more about the why—as in, "why do people do the things they do?"

Jennifer stressed the importance of making sure everyone

on the team, from the 22-year-old who just started working last month to senior leaders, "know our team's strategic objectives and how their day-to-day work contributes to something bigger." She said chasing opportunities and empowering staff to take them on is a fun and gratifying part of her job.

Another aspect of LaBella's work that is particularly meaningful to Jennifer is the affordable housing projects that transform contaminated land into homes and revitalize communities. "We initially became involved in this work because there were great business opportunities, as New York State offered a lucrative tax credit incentive program for brownfields redevelopment. This led to impactful projects but, more importantly, meaningful, long-lasting relationships," Jennifer explained. Over time, these projects became more like working with family; the change-makers in this space are mission-based and relish the opportunity to be part of something bigger."

Overcoming Adversity

Early in her career, Jennifer navigated a largely male-dominated industry as an introverted female and a member of the LGBTQ community, which at times made her feel as though she did not fully fit in. One of the more personal challenges she faced was going public about her sexual orientation. She was initially uncertain how her supervisors, colleagues, and clients would respond. However, her boss and coworkers were supportive, and her openness was met with acceptance and support from the start.

The skills Jennifer developed early in her career by leading through adversity became especially relevant years later in a very different context. As with many businesses, navigating the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic required adaptability and resolve. On top of the general uncertainty we all faced, there were the added challenges of implementing remote work, pivoting to new markets and demonstrating strong leadership that people looked to in a crisis. While demanding, these conditions helped Jen hone that internal "muscle" of resilience and determination.

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Listening and Advice

Jennifer attributes much of her success to being a good listener. She is genuinely interested in people's stories and has learned to be communicative, thoughtful, and transparent. By listening, she is often able to assist teams with problem-solving. And while she has a casual, relaxed "go with the flow" style, Jennifer also describes herself as proactive and as someone who takes the responsibility of

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having a voice at the table very seriously.

Her advice to women getting started or looking for a career change is to "take control of your own destiny. No one is better to advocate for you than yourself." Jennifer has learned to ignore the "little voice" in her head that tries to intimidate her, instead pushing it aside and remaining confident in her thoughts and approach. She also advises people to "nurture mentors in your career to help navigate opportunities."

Current Trends and Looking to the Future

Everyone is looking into AI to explore how it can help

streamline or better develop tools to make their daily work lives easier — LaBella is no exception. Jennifer is also monitoring energy transmission, data centers, climate resilience, renewables, and new territories for expansion. Every state or country has its own regulations and challenges to overcome that make growth and advancement stimulating and fresh.

Would she start over and do things differently? No, Jennifer is grateful for her path and the opportunities she has experienced. She is passionate about her profession, is challenged by the diversity of projects she undertakes, and enjoys the people she works with.

As for her future, Jennifer plans to keep learning. She has a long-standing interest in urban planning and spends some of her personal time honing her craft as a fiction writer when not spending time with her wife and two children. She is optimistic about LaBella's continued growth and evolution and looks forward to seizing new opportunities as they arise. 

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