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In preparation for International Women in Engineering Day, packaging writer Emma-Jane Batey spoke to Brittany Brooks, sales representative at global plastic packaging producer RETAL, about her journey from humble beginnings, to mentoring the next generation of STEM students for a career in engineering.

Alabama native Brittany Brooks has forged a successful career in plastic packaging thanks to her determination to harness her intellect and utilize her opportunities. With a strong character and an even stronger dedication to being successful in everything she does, Brittany has recently been promoted to sales representative at global plastic packaging producer RETAL, at its Donora PA facility.

Born in a small town in Alabama in the southeast of North America, Brittany did not come from a wealthy or educated immediate family yet has consistently succeeded against a backdrop of limited support in her higher education. She says, "My grandparents have always encouraged me to learn and use my brain. My grandad was a retired math professor and he shared with me a love of math; he'd teach me things I wasn't supposed to know yet! I was also intrigued by science from a young age; my aunt would give me experiments to do and articles to read."

As part of the Community Action Partnership of North Alabama, Brittany's parents and siblings were supported by the Head Start program, which is 'America's Poverty Fighting Network' that is 'helping people change lives'. She credits Head Start with making sure she didn't miss out on early years education, saying, "It really was a golden group for me. It offers a start for low-income families to get their kids on the right foot in their education and they feed the kids free breakfast and lunch. I was so lucky to have had that opportunity."

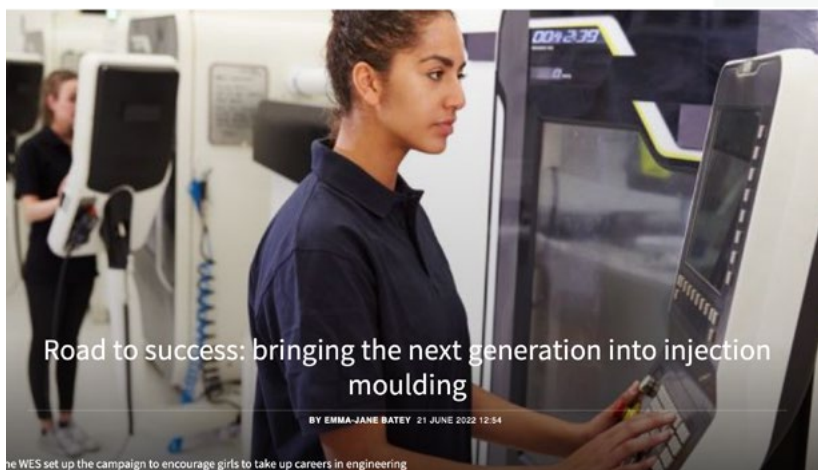
Once at school, Brittany caught the eye of an inspiring teacher who noticed her potential and challenged her obvious abilities by putting her on the math team, which was a welcome distraction from the continuing difficulties at home. Brittany says, "From then on, I knew I loved math and science and that I had to push myself to be the best I could be. At high school I loved math, chemistry, and biology, so when I went to university to study biochemistry it was perfect for me!"

During university, Brittany went to Hong Kong to study Mandarin for a semester, followed by gaining a visa to study in Australia, leading her to focus her studies at the University of Colorado in the US on more technical science rather than chemical engineering. She adds, "I'm now doing my master's in business administration as I think this will really add corporate knowledge and practices. I'm learning so much!"

Global opportunities

After graduating and working for a pharmaceutical technology company in a graduate science role, Brittany saw a lab technician role online at RETAL PA, the Pennsylvania factory of a global plastic packaging group, which appealed to her as a way to integrate her studies and work for a large organization. She says, "I was so interested in the thought of working for a plastic packaging company; I thought, 'I can really get behind this!' I applied and spoke to the HR manager; I could tell the role was varied and that the team was so active. I was so pleased when she offered me the job!"

After three months of driving for three hours a day to get to RETAL in Donora and then home again, Brittany moved closer. She says, "I know my future is with RETAL so I wanted to make that commitment. I'm good at making my own path and it feels like there are so many opportunities here. When the sales coordinator role first came up, I applied internally, but the sales manager at that time didn't think I was a good fit. But then there were a couple of changes in the team, and people here were so keen to make sure I stayed! It felt good for my work to be recognized, as I was then offered the sales coordinator role, which I was delighted to accept!"





Brittany's unique ability to combine in-depth technical information with a charismatic approach to understanding what customers want has proven to be a welcome addition to the RETAL PA sales team, not to mention her language skills, gained during her time in Hong Kong. She says, "I have this one customer who called and realised I spoke Mandarin, and now we've become friends! She can ask me product questions and I can explain them in her own language. It's the same for all my customers; I know about limits, tests, preform sizes, information from the lab...I think if a customer can tell that they can trust you to give them the right information, they feel better about buying from you."

Brittany was offered and accepted the promotion to sales representative in August 2021, highlighting again that her skills, informed approach and dynamic character are appreciated by her employer and a real success story of the Head Start program.

Continuing to pay it forward, Brittany is also mentoring STEM students as part of the inspirational Bots IQ workforce program, which encourages manufacturing companies to partner with students in robotics competitions to highlight the rewarding careers available in STEM. Brittany says, "I love every minute of working with the Bots IQ kids; we've been helping them learn about injection moulding and it's so good to see how they use what they've learned in a fun workplace setting! We've also got an intern through the program and they will be under my wing in the quality laboratory."

By March 2022, with the challenges of the pandemic steadily passing and the exciting expansion project at RETAL in Donora well under way, Brittany was again promoted, this time to the role of Quality Manager. This career progression sees Brittany heading up the quality department, a highly responsible role that pays tribute to her dedication and hard work, with direct responsibility for six employees.

As she reflects on her achievements so far and looks forward to continued progress thanks to her unstoppable energy and the opportunities she generates, Brittany appreciates the early support she had from her grandparents, aunt, and the Head Start team. She says, "I'm so grateful that I've had people in my life that recognized and encouraged my potential. I can tell RETAL values my contribution too and I can see so many chances to keep growing; I've already been promoted three times. It feels like so many people are rooting for me!"



Brittany Brooks