

## The School of Skilled Trades Graduates its First Female Valedictorian



Erica Furlan, the Skilled Trades Centre's first female valedictorian, didn't give much thought to her gender before deciding to apply to Sheridan's Welding Techniques Program.

When asked how she came to consider welding as a career, Erica explained that her goal in high school was to pursue chemistry as a career but, due to some health issues, didn't quite get the marks she needed. While talking through her options with someone (one of which was to take some upgrade courses), this person casually stated, "If you can't get into what you want and you want a position that makes money, maybe try welding because people will always need welders."

That got Erica contemplating the idea, and as she began looking into it, quickly realized that the profession of welding checked some of her 'pro' boxes; things such as working with your hands and the chemistry involved in metallurgy.

As for being a female welder, Erica stated, "I honestly didn't think about it [ how male-dominated the welding profession is ] that much until I actually started going to school." It was then that she started noticing the gender composition of her classes. In addition, some of her instructors commented to her that there aren't a lot of female welders and that they were happy to see more females entering the program. As Erica further explains ... "It didn't cross my mind as a problem until I read what other people said on the subject."

But Erica did not have any gender-related experiences during her time at Sheridan. She explained that she received encouragement and support from her instructors, and that gender was not an issue that came up with her peers. No one was dismissive or sexist with her in class. She got the impression that her classmates and peers just didn't think about it much.

Seemingly wise beyond her years, Erica conveyed that gender was simply a non-issue during her time at Sheridan; the ideal situation for the working world which she hopes we achieve someday.

To be a female welder didn't strike Erica as special... what did surprise her was being chosen as valedictorian AND learning that she is STC's first female valedictorian (she thinks that's really cool).



While she considers herself to be a ‘welding nerd’ as she refers to herself (her definition: “if its something I’m passionate or interested in, I’ll learn everything I can about it and absorb all the information”), she didn’t think she had the grades to be valedictorian. But Daniel Liao, the Associate Dean of the School of Skilled Trades sheds light on why Erica was chosen, noting the following contributing factors:

- she was a good student with a GPA over 3.0
- she had overcome multiple barriers in her journey through the program
- she participated in many of the Student Union hosted events, and
- sought ways for skilled trades students to be better integrated into such events given their large course load and the fact that they are generally on campus wearing their “gear”.

When asked what she would tell a group of high school girls if she were asked to talk to them about considering a trade as a career option, Erica’s response, not surprisingly, contained no reference to gender. Delivered with confidence and without hesitation, here is Erica’s message verbatim...



“Trades people are basically the people who are building the world around you. If you've ever lived in a home, you've experienced the work of multiple different trades people; you've touched the work of carpenters, you've had electricity routed through your home by an electrician, you've had a welder put together the steel reinforcements in the buildings in the cities. All of these trades are basically keeping the world running and they're building the future. So your work, if you are a trades person and you're building anything, you are helping build something that will last for decades... it could be a hundred years. If you're building steel structures, building bridges literally, you are helping to build the future and you might not realize how valuable these things are until you start to notice them.”

Well said, Erica!

So, what is Erica doing now? She’s building aluminum frames for trade show booths and other neat things for The Taylor Group (taylorinc.com). She says, “Everyone I work with has been friendly and helpful, and I'm really enjoying it! I hope to keep working there for a long time to come.”

The School of Skilled Trades, the Faculty of Applied Science & Technology and indeed, the whole of Sheridan College wishes Erica the very best as she continues her journey into her exciting new career.

Read Erica’s Valedictorian Speech delivered at Convocation on October 16<sup>th</sup> at this link:

[http://tech.fast.sheridanc.on.ca/r/events/valedictorian\\_speech\\_erica\\_furlan.pdf](http://tech.fast.sheridanc.on.ca/r/events/valedictorian_speech_erica_furlan.pdf)

