

# SUZANNE NAYLOR

## A real star

The 34-year-old who now manages water services for a big chunk of Auckland is not just a shining exemplar of the profession for would-be engineers. Suzanne Naylor is, literally, a star – as **Vicki Jayne** discovers.



**T**here are not too many people who can peer up into the night sky and pick out their own star. Suzanne Naylor is one of them.

Watercare's Northern Networks Manager was recently dubbed "Inspirational leader" at the annual Connexis "Celebration of Women in Infrastructure" lunch and as she explains, that honour came with a pretty unique prize.

"It came from the British Astronomical Society which has named a star 'Suzanne Naylor' and given me the coordinates for it. Cool, eh!"

Already planning a family star-spotting trip to Stardome, she happily ponders the possibility of life in her distant quadrant of the sky: "Naylorians – we already named them. One of my staff came up with that. I like it."

With her easy manner, bubbly good humour and fairly stellar career trajectory, it's no surprise Naylor is also an ambassador for the Government's "Make the World" initiative to encourage youngsters into an engineering degree. It helps that she just loves her job.

Appointed to her current role earlier this year, she is responsible for ensuring provision of drinking water and removal of wastewater across commercial, industrial and residential sites stretching from Auckland's North Shore out to Rodney and Waitakere. That involves managing a big team as well as a \$20 million maintenance contract while constantly having to deal with the sort of crisis that accompanies the region's twin challenges of rapid expansion and aging infrastructure.

Asked to describe a typical day, she says it doesn't really exist.

"Every day is completely different. It sounds bizarre but the reality is that while I come to work with great schemes of addressing specific network issues and planning how things can be improved, I get there and discover, say, that Orewa is about to run out of water because of a mains break... So you have to drop everything to focus on that."

This is a region where there's a lot of new development – adding to both the size and complexity of the job. The infrastructure in new developments has to be up to standard so it can be seamlessly stitched into existing water networks.

"In my area alone, we're getting 30 new pump stations a year. That's phenomenal growth. So, every year, the assets I look after are multiplying. That's a challenge."

It is, she says, a "very reactive" job. Luckily, she's up for it.

"I do love a challenge – I love fixing things, making things better than they were, building in more efficiency, employing new technologies and asking how can we make this service the best for everybody: the best for users, good for contractors, easy for my team to manage."

Engineering, she reckons, comes with an inherent creativity.

"There's no 'one size fits all' solution – you have to come up with creative methods to find what is the best way for this to work. So there's a lot of problem solving and coming up with ideas that may not have been used before."

Yet it's a career she fell into pretty much by accident – mainly thanks to the treasured car she acquired after leaving school.

"It was worth 700 bucks and I loved it, so I wanted to

drive it to uni. That wasn't possible at Auckland so I got the prospectus for Unitec and circled anything that looked interesting."

That was influenced both by her parents and childhood experiences. A "born and bred Westie", Naylor and her brother enjoyed what was once seen as a fairly typical Kiwi upbringing – full of bush walks, beach visits and DIY entertainment with extended family.

She loves animals and wanted to be a vet right up until she took on an after-school job at a veterinary clinic and realised that if she went down that track, she'd probably end up running an animal refuge. Outdoor work also appealed.

When it came to choosing courses, her parents were pretty insistent she do a degree rather than a diploma so after crossing out landscape design, the remaining option was... environmental engineering.

"I didn't even really know what environmental engineering was all about but I had good grades so I was accepted."

It turned out to be a great choice.

"The classes were small – just seven of us were taking the full degree course – and it was also very hands on. You were out there in streams doing surveys – not just theory. When I look at the people who graduated from that degree, they're all doing amazing things."

It also proved a bit of a one-off as Unitec subsequently discontinued the degree. "I just lucked in," says Naylor.

Turned out she also had a nose for the work – literally. As part of her practical training, she applied for a summer job at Watercare – odour monitoring. The job interview consisted of a sniff test using an olfactometer.

"Three of us had applied and, honestly, it was like Goldilocks. One's nose proved too sensitive, the other's not sensitive enough and I was right in the middle. So I got hired because I had a 'plain nose'. They needed that as it was more representative of the community in which I would be doing odour control."

The summer role turned into a part-time job which then morphed, after she graduated, into fulltime employment – this time, in an environmental planning role. Although she enjoyed the work, a relationship breakup prompted her to extend her horizons offshore. That led to two years of working for a solid waste company in the UK. But she stayed in touch with friends at Watercare – and her decision to come home coincided with a job vacancy.

Initially appointed to do another compliance role, she was later promoted to Headworks Engineer – looking after Auckland's raw water resources. It was a big step up.

"I was 26 and in charge of a team looking after billions of dollars worth of assets. I inherited a team of nine men whose collective experience totted up to 350 years – but they hadn't had a lot of support."

She brought a stronger environmental focus to the role. One project she initiated was implementing a fish-trapping haul around the dams to facilitate fish migration.

"There was a lot of learning involved and it was quite a big thing to get those people passionate about moving fish around – it's quite a different sort of skill set."

Passion is a word that crops up a bit when Naylor talks

about her work. As a leader, she believes it is part of her role to find and encourage what gets people excited about their work.

“I think being a leader is about finding the bit in people that really fires them up – the passion for what they do.”

Although somewhat diffident talking about her ‘leadership style’ (“I’ve never done management training”), Naylor says her basic philosophy is to treat people as she’d want to be

treated. She likes to let people find their own feet – giving support where and when needed. A natural team player, she’d rather engage people in finding solutions than tell them what they should do.

That desire to help people discover what really works for them extends to her mentoring role with IPENZ. She currently has seven mentees and finds that, with the younger ones in particular, it is often a lack of confidence that holds them back.

“It’s the need to learn everything and gain respect at the same time and being a bit too shy to push yourself.”

It reflects early challenges in her own career – earning respect for her opinions and her decisions. In her case, that involved overcoming some preconceptions about the sort of person she was. Her quick humour is something she’s had to peg back a bit to earn her stripes in what is a very professional and male dominated world.

“The problem I’ve had is that I talk fast, I’m very social, tend to giggle – it’s a bit of a young and girly image. It took a while to get over the stigma of being a young blonde girl who laughs a lot – in a man’s world.”

That, she says, was a matter of time, maturity – and backing herself in terms of a growing knowledge base.

“If I’m not 100 percent sure about something, I hold back, research and basically do a lot more work to back



**Eel trap and transfer.**

my decisions. It's about learning as much as you can to gain people's respect so that when you make a decision, they'll go with it.

"Whether that is a young person's thing or a women's thing, what I've learned is that in this industry, you have to back yourself, 100 percent."

As with many women, she has also had to juggle career and children.

"It's been quite hard. We have three children and my husband opted to be a stay-at-home dad which allowed me to go back to work fairly early on."

Because life on one income wasn't a lot of fun, they decided to have three children in fairly quick succession so both could return to work a bit sooner. A flexible working environment and supportive parents have also helped but with three children under six, life tends to be a tad chaotic.

"The only way you can do it as a fulltime working mum is with lots of support;" she notes.

So – are enough women choosing a career in engineering?

"I think we could be doing more to promote engineering to them at high school level. You have to like maths and science – and women often prefer arts subjects. But engineering is not all hard hats and bridges and I think we could do a lot more to get rid of some of the preconceptions and stigmas around it."

One of the big challenges facing the 3-Waters industry is that it is losing a lot of experienced staff through retirement and finding good graduates isn't easy.

"I've got a good mix in my team. About half have a lot of experience and the other half are quite new to it. So the younger ones get technical mentoring and they also bring in some new ideas and new passion. So it's a good mix but we have to keep succession planning for everybody and it's a matter of finding people with the passion for the work."

Naylor still has plenty of that to share. Asked about the memorable bits of her career, she finds it hard to choose.

"It's been a blast. The people I work with are amazing; Watercare is a great place to work. I've had some wonderful opportunities, some really different jobs...."

"I really like how reactive the work is. It's interesting coming to work not really knowing what exactly is going to happen, having to think on your feet and make quick decisions – even if you sometimes don't have all the information you would probably like. It's about having good people around you and making good decisions."

The work is neither prescriptive nor boring.

"It's not like you have someone telling you what you're going to be doing today – you're left in charge and have to take control, to make things work better. There's a lot of accountability. And every day is different." **WNZ**