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Women in engineering lauded as call goes out for more diversity in profession

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The ACEC-NB held its annual Awards for Engineering Excellence in Fredericton last week to celebrate engineering achievements in New Brunswick. A special "Women in Engineering and Geoscience" reception was held to celebrate, from left, Christy Cunningham, Christine Plourde and Anne Poschmann, who are all currently chairing their respective engineering associations.

Photo: James West/The Daily Gleaner

Christine Plourde, Christy Cunningham and Anne Poschmann have a few things in common. They love math equations and solving problems.

The three women are also presidents of three different engineering associations and were recognized for their involvement within New Brunswick and across the country at the ACEC-NB Awards for Engineering Excellence.

The women were acknowledged Thursday night at the Crowne Plaza by ACEC-NB, an organization that represents the commercial interests of businesses that provide engineering services to better the public and private sector and APEGNB, which regulated the practice of engineering and geoscience in accordance with the Engineering and Geoscience Professions Act in New Brunswick.

"This is the first year we have three female chairs at various organizations," said Nadine Boudreau, executive director of ACEC-NB.

"We're going to celebrate that and underline the importance of diversity in the workforce and try to attract more women towards the engineering and science profession."

The women spoke about the rewarding career opportunities for women in engineering and geoscience.

"There is still a lot of misconception about what engineers do and what roles they play in society," said Boudreau.

"Electricity doesn't just happen by itself. There's somebody behind that and responsible for designing the electrical system and the ventilation system ... Engineers, scientists they touch everything."

Throughout the evening, the ceremony, which has been held annually for the past 18 years, also recognized different engineering projects.

"It highlights the work these firms are doing," said Cunningham, president of the Association of Consulting Engineers in New Brunswick (ACEC-NB), and professional geoscientist who has worked in the consulting engineering business for 12 years.

"All of it contributes to the well-being of our society and our quality of lives."

Christine Plourde, president of Engineers and Geoscientists New Brunswick (APEGNB), said more women need to be involved in the field of engineering.

Plourde, a civil engineering graduate of the University of New Brunswick and co-founder of the New Brunswick Women in Engineering and Geoscience (NBWIEG) Networking Group, hopes to change this by the APEGNB's recent creation of a diversity and inclusion committee. The committee's initial focus is to help New Brunswick achieve Engineers Canada's "30 by 2030" goal, where at least 30 per cent of newly licensed engineers are women by 2030.

"Engineering is still misunderstood and people don't necessarily understand the diversity of engineering and how much of a fulfilling profession it is," said Plourde, who has always enjoyed studying science and math in high school.

"We're trying to communicate better about what engineering is and how it affects people's lives and 30 per cent is a tipping point that change is really starting to happen on its own."

Before Thursday's award ceremony, the group of women said girls in high school and young women in university need to start being exposed to engineering and geoscience. They added that many students might not even understand what engineering really is.

"It's this typical unknown bias that's in everybody," said Poschmann, president of the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies-Canada.

“It’s in the back of everybody’s mind and that needs to change.”

Poschmann, a principal and senior geotechnical engineer at Golder Associated limited in Toronto, has 29 years of experience in all geotechnical aspects. Her association in New Brunswick has endorsed that goal within the province.

Poschmann, who was encouraged to take engineering by her two older brothers after one of them flunked out of the program, said she hopes Thursday’s event will inspire women in high school and university to consider engineering to create more diversity in the work force.

The women also said engineering is in high demand across the province.

“It’s a very interesting career,” said Cunningham. “You’re not going to do the same thing twice.”

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