

SWRMC host Women's Leadership Panel

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SAN DIEGO—Southwest Regional Maintenance Center (SWRMC) held its first “Women’s Leadership Panel” in honor of Women’s Equality Day, Aug. 26, in the command’s Engineering Training Room.

Panel members included: Capt. Heide Stefanyshyn-Piper, SWRMC’s commanding officer; Katherine Placey, SWRMC’s finance department head; Grace Bates, SWRMC’s command evaluation and review officer; Kristina Fortner, SWRMC’s training division head, and Chief Petty Officer (CPO) Jessica Phommachanh, Electrical Fleet Tech Assist lead CPO for SWRMC’s engineering code 262.

The purpose of SWRMC’s “Women’s Leadership Panel” was to bring together some of SWRMC’s most prominent leaders to share their insight and experience leading as women.

Questions for the panel were submitted to SWRMC’s public affairs staff prior to the event. Questions ranged from “What motivates you personally?” and “What are characteristic of a good employee?” to “How is being a woman different than being a man in the workforce?”

“I think you as a woman have to define yourself because from the beginning you’re told what you should be,” said Bates. “Your parents try to push you in a certain direction. Growing up you hear girls can’t do this, girls can’t do that, but you have to be courageous enough to say, I can and I will do it well.”

“One of the biggest challenges I’ve experienced being a female engineer in a male dominated field is actually looking like a girl,” said Fortner. “You already lose credibility if you’re a female, but then when you wear makeup, dresses, and heels, and you’re positive and bubbly you tend to be immediately written off as not knowing what you are talking about. But what that did was force me to work harder. I had to be more on my game and work hard to earn their respect because I was not willing to give up that part of myself.”

When the floor was opened to the audience, a young female sailor thanked Stefanyshyn-Piper for settings such a positive example.

“When I found out we had a female CO I was really excited,” said Petty Officer 2nd Class Chantel Che, a fire controlman here. “I’ve been in 8 years and just knowing that we do have females in the Navy who have made it as far as you have is really motivating. You even have a Wikipedia page! Seeing that our CO is a female, you’re married, you had a child, and you have experienced a lot of the same obstacles we face all the time and you still did it! You are a great example! It’s pretty cool.”

Very humbled by the comment, Stefanyshyn-Piper responded by telling the audience they can do anything they put their mind to.

“You look back at the history of Women’s Equality Day and you see we got where we are today because there were women that had the courage to press forward for women’s rights,” said Stefanyshyn-Piper.

“I’m very humbled and grateful that I can show the next generation what it is women can do. Don’t ever let someone tell you can’t do something unless there is a valid reason why you cannot do it. For example, I couldn’t become a pilot because I failed the eye test and that wasn’t going to change so I accepted that. But I knew I could go to dive school. Figure out what your strengths are, grow them, and you will be successful.”

One motivating factor the entire panel agreed was a driving force to do their job well is making a difference and doing something that matters.

“Being in a leadership position matters and I think it matters how well you do it,” said Placey. “And I think it matters if you have people’s interest in mind and that you’re trying to do the right thing.”

“When I see a Sailor that I gave that slight positive push to get promoted, I feel so proud that I actually made a difference in somebody else’s life,” said Phommachanh. “It’s a wonderful feeling.”

Overall advice the panel gave the audience was to stay motivated, take initiative, communicate well, get along with your coworkers, and find solutions for problems.

“Get comfortable being the only one that looks like you at the table” said Bates. “You might be the only woman engineer, you might be the only minority there, and as you move up you’re going to be the only one more and more and that’s ok. Be the only one and set the example for everyone that’s coming behind you because now that you’ve seen a female CO, you’re saying hey I can do that too!”

For more information about SWRMC, please visit <http://www.swrmc.navy.mil/>.

For more information about Women’s Equality Day, please visit <http://www.nwhp.org/resourcecenter/equalityday.php>.