



Shawn Emerson Simmons (1971-Present)

Environmental & Regulatory Advisor

ExxonMobil

"Find someone within your school or organization who is an environmental professional, and who does the job you might want to do some day, and make them one of your mentors." Shawn E. Simmons, 2006.

Overview

Shawn Emerson Simmons is the Environmental & Regulatory Supervisor in the Nigeria Projects Organization of Mobil Producing Nigeria. Simmons has a B.S. in Petroleum Engineering from the University of Oklahoma, a M.S. in Environmental Engineering from Rice University, and a Ph.D. in Environmental Toxicology from Texas Southern University. Prior to her international assignment, Simmons was a board member of several community based organizations including Bayou Land Conservancy, Child Care Council (Chair), and United Way's Project Blueprint. Simmons credits AISL with helping to make the transition of an international assignment smooth for her family. She believes that AISL provides her children with a top notch American education and helps reinforce the importance of being a good citizen of the world.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

Shawn Emerson Simmons' career in the environmental field is testament to his combination of tenacity, curiosity and good mentorship. Simmons knew early on that she wanted to be an engineer, but after graduating from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in petroleum engineering in 1993, she was not quite sure what to do with herself from there. "I knew I wanted to get a master's degree, but I struggled with deciding what type of degree to get—I didn't know if I wanted to get an MBA, or an engineering degree," she explains. Because of her background in petroleum engineering and environmental science, one of her professors suggested she consider combining her environmental expertise with a career in the oil and gas industry.

As a result of this advice, Simmons sought out an internship with Exxon, the organization she would later devote her career to. That led to a series of what would ultimately become six summer internships with

the company (now ExxonMobil). Although each internship was different, Simmons' work focused largely doing environmental risk assessments and analyzing safety measures. "One of those summers, I worked for the Exxon Production Research Company, and looked at oil and gas facility software that helped determine safety, health and environmental risk in specific scenarios," Simmons explains. "The software is used to analyze risk, in order for engineers to determine what kind of mitigation need to be considered in the design and operations of facilities."

After completing her final internship in 1996, Simmons shifted her efforts more toward her graduate research. She earned her master's degree in environmental engineering from Rice University in 1999, and went on to get her doctorate in environmental toxicology from Texas Southern University. In 2000, despite still working on her doctorate at the time, Simmons was hired full time as an environmental coordinator at ExxonMobil's Baytown chemical plant. She credits her previous internships with the company, as well as a recommendation from a professor, for helping her get the job. "I was a Ph.D. candidate at the time, but I waited until I was finished with my first semester before I decided to go for it," she says. "I fell into it, and got good at it from that point on."

Career

Currently, Simmons is an environmental and regulatory advisor for the ExxonMobil Development Company, a position she has held for the past three years. She now works on supporting two projects in West Africa, where she is responsible for environmental management and regulatory compliance. "It's a great job," Simmons says. She cites her ability to travel (she has now been to Africa six times, and has also traveled in Europe) and supportive colleagues and managers for making her work enjoyable and meaningful.

Highlights

Simmons cites traveling to Africa as the highlight of her career so far. She went there for the first time in November of 2003, and has been back several times since then. "As a black female, for me it was almost spiritual," she explains. "It became a pilgrimage...and while I thought it was important for me professionally to be there—international work travel is always good for one's career—it was also important personally for me to be there." Simmons also notes her travels abroad as a major career achievement, especially since foreign travel is typically reserved for employees with much more seniority.

Simmons participates in many diversity-related efforts and initiatives. Among these is the National Society of Black Engineers, where she has worked on recruiting and a number of educational workshops; the United Way's Project Blueprint, which trains minorities to serve on non-profit and for-profit boards in the Houston area; and in her community's Child Care Council, which helps train day care workers serving the children of largely black and Latino workers. She has also participated in Introduce-A-Girl-To-Engineering Day, and sits on the board of the Legacy Land Trust, a conservation group dedicated to preserving open spaces in Houston.

Challenges

Balancing career, community and mentoring activities and family is a challenge for Simmons, but one that she relishes. “Giving up is not an option,” she says. “I love my job.” She considers her ability to balance work and home life her most significant achievement, but also says that would not be possible without some outside help. “My husband is a wonderful partner—I couldn’t do it if it wasn’t for his support of my life and things I want to do,” she says. As the mother of two young children as well, Simmons says she has learned that sometimes “It’s ok to press the reset button, and recognize that you have to reign things in, to keep that harmony.”

Mentoring Others

Simmons now takes the time to act as a mentor for others. She frequently returns to her old high school, where she shares stories from her career with students. “I talk about my travel experiences, and I can see that they are interested in my job,” Simmons says. “They usually ask me lots of questions, and it’s gratifying to see that I might be making a small impact on their lives and future careers.”

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Simmons has had “countless formal and informal mentors” throughout her academic and professional careers. From teachers and counselors at her engineering technical high school to university professors and senior managers who have been willing to lend their support and answer questions, Simmons has always sought out the benefits of a supportive network. Her first supervisor at ExxonMobil, another female who is still her mentor today, has been another source of inspiration. “That’s rare in this area—she would fill me in on her perspective on various issues, which was helpful for me,” she says. Simmons is also part of a women’s network within the development division where she currently works: “The group consists of 20 to 30 women who hold jobs ranging from lower level staff to management staff positions. We get together and talk, brainstorm and mentor each other within the company.”

Advice to Young Professionals

Simmons’ advice to minorities interested in the environmental field is to be proactive—investigate, network and find positions that fit what you want to do. “Research the area. Know what opportunities are out there, because there are a lot of arenas within the environmental field,” she advises. She the following advice to aspiring environmental professionals: “Find someone within your school or organization who is an environmental professional and who does the job you might want to do some day, and make them one of your mentors. Have them as a resource to ask questions and bounce things off of.”