



Laura Weber (1961-Present)

Director of Solid Waste Program
St. Regis Mohawk Tribe (SRMT)

"Don't give up. Be adaptable and flexible in order to in order to do what you need to do to achieve the goals you want to achieve." Laura Weber, 2006

Early Life

Laura Weber grew up in rural northern New York along the St. Lawrence River. She says that her childhood surroundings instilled in her a great love and concern for the environment, but she also faced certain low expectations. "There were people there who said that I should stay in my hometown and pump gas all my life," Weber says. "I'm so thankful to be where I am today." Today, Weber is the director of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe's (SRMT) Solid Waste Program, where she has overseen the creation, development and establishment of an innovative, tribal-run solid waste disposal program.

Education

Weber earned two undergraduate degrees; a bachelor's degree in chemistry from State University of New York (SUNY)-Plattsburgh, and a Bachelor of Science in chemical engineering from Clarkson University. Weber always spent a great deal of time outdoors in the woods, and her study of natural processes from a scientific perspective made her think about how pollution is created. Weber says that, as a chemical engineer, she knew that what she did could greatly hurt or greatly benefit the natural environment, and she would eventually have to make a choice. "I wanted to be on the side that solved pollution problems, not created them," she says. When she found out that Clarkson offered a Master of Science in civil and environmental engineering, she knew that was the path she wanted to take.

After earning her master's degree in 1991, Weber wanted to open her own environmental consulting firm. First, she conducted research and gathered resources; fortunately, New York offers access to small business centers, and Weber received assistance in establishing and organizing her business. Weber notes her work on a state-funded research project (examining waste paper animal bedding on local farms) during graduate school was an important

experience; it allowed her to build up a network of business contacts that she later utilized in starting her own business.

Career

However, after several years of consulting work, Weber decided that she was not satisfied with the workload cycle, which she describes as “either too busy or not busy enough.” She chose to go back to school to study for her doctorate. Weber also took a part-time job with the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe; after one year, she abandoned school to work for the tribe full-time. At the time, the tribe had no solid waste management program. Eleven years later, Weber has overseen the implementation of the entire program, including creating solid waste regulations, developing education programs about proper disposal methods, and monitoring everything that goes on from finances to trash shipping. Curbside collection began for the first time in 2002, and a transfer station opened in 2005. “It is a fully operational, self-sufficient solid waste program,” Weber says proudly. The EPA and other Federal agencies now regularly ask her to speak at conferences, and she has received a grant to do solid waste education programs for other tribes in the region.

Challenges

Despite her career success, Weber is careful to note that she has encountered a number of obstacles; her grades in high school and college were sometimes poor, and she had to meet with university faculty personally to convince them to admit her. There was also a time when continued funding for her current position was threatened, and Weber faced the possibility having to leave the project that she had created, developed and overseen. “I worked so hard to get the project up and running, and at a critical moment it seemed like the funding was going to get cut off,” she says. Ultimately, Weber was able to “shake the money tree” and find the funds to keep the program going; yet bringing in money and resources to keep the program self-sustaining has been a continual challenge. Throughout such challenges, Weber has benefited from the advice and guidance of other members of the Native community, including the Dean of Engineering at Clarkson, who was the Chapter Advisor for the American Indian Science and Engineering Society, SRMT’s Environment Division Director and Assistant Director, and the Tribal Council.

Advice to Young Professionals

Weber believes that her work in the environmental field is simply the life path that she was destined to follow. A committed Christian, Weber believes God has a plan for her life, and “Being in the environmental field is part of what I am supposed to be doing,” she says. She says that after coming from a place of low expectations, struggling in school, and dealing with all the challenges inherent to the field, she is thankful to be where she is today. She attributes her success to following God’s plan for her life, believing in her work, and refusing to give up. She

advises young people of color in the environmental field to do the same: “Be adaptable and flexible in order to do what you need to do to achieve the goals that you want to achieve.”

This interview was conducted in 2015.