

Where there's a will, there's a way!

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The following story is about a friend of mine who agreed to share her story in hopes of encouraging other young women to pursue managerial careers. Shirley Oden Cox retired from the Y-12 National Security Complex a few years back but she has not slowed down. She remains on the Y-12 Community Relations Council, a most influential group of community leaders who serve Y-12 in an advisory capacity.

Shirley has allowed me to tell her story. Get ready, this is going to be grand!

William Lewis (Bill) Oden moved his wife and two children to Oak Ridge in September of 1944 to begin a career at the K-25 Plant after his job with an ammunitions plant in Little Rock, Arkansas ended. Bill and his wife, Nell, began their lives in Oak Ridge like many other people who relocated to Oak Ridge from various other walks of life to a "secret project" that would be come careers for them, but also for some of their children.

One of the Oden's children, Shirley, who was next to the oldest of the eventual family of five Oden children, began her career in 1963 at the Y-12 Plant at the lowest entry level clerical position available, at a remarkable salary of \$235 per month. Shirley had graduated from Oak Ridge High School where she had taken typing, shorthand, and any other business class she could get into, as she knew that was her vehicle for getting a "good job at the plant." Ironically, it was actually her basketball skills that helped get her a first interview at Y-12. Bill Akers, her church-league, combined city-league, basketball coach was also one of the managers within the Personnel Department at Union Carbide's Y-12 Plant.

Shirley began working her administrative position within the Y-12 Statistical Services Control Department where John Lay, Sr., was the supervisor. There were four other women within the department: Asa Gentry, Bertha Crowder, Sally Cornell and Flo Simpson, some of whom have now passed on. Shirley was 19 at the time, and the next youngest was Flo, at the ripe ole age of 40 years of age.

Being inquisitive by nature was not necessarily an attractive or acceptable characteristic in those days, according to Shirley. Her knowledge of Y-12 at the time was limited to "something was going on there related to atoms" – her second grade class had participated in the demonstration at the Atomic Museum where your hair stood up after placing her hand on this "round ball."

Shirley was not only inquisitive, but also persistent. After all, her dad had always told her, "Where there's a will, there's a way!" That message has stayed with Shirley all her life. Incidentally, she has passed on that message in life to not only her two daughters throughout their 40+ years of life, she is now passing on that message to her four grandsons who are college age!

Realizing that "entry level" salary was just not going to satisfy Shirley for the life she wanted to provide for her two daughters and herself, she began searching for opportunities beyond the "secretarial field" – now remember, back in those days, college education for "girls" was either because their families had money to send them to college and/or they wanted to be a "school teacher" and somehow found a way to get that type of education. I mean, after all, why else would a young lady go to college when there were other siblings (including three brothers) in the family still requiring food and shelter.

Shirley worked her way through a few levels of administrative promotions, up to a secretary to a Department Superintendent, and then realized the only "promotional opportunity" visible to her was to await the retirement of one of the six division head secretaries currently employed. Well, fortunately for Shirley and women in similar situations, along came the "Affirmative Action Act" of 1986. At Y-12, this meant non-degreed women and minorities could have an opportunity to get into career "fields" previously designated pretty much for the "white males."

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As a result, Shirley went out on a limb and applied for one of the "Materials Dispatcher" positions, and was given the job. It was not the typical job that a former "secretary/office worker" who always wore a dress to work (pants were not really acceptable for women in the office during that period of time) and usually had to work "shift work".

One of the first conversations she recalls about this new field was the announcement to the ~60 white male Materials Dispatchers was that those guys would not be eligible for a promotion until some of the "minorities" – meaning women or Blacks, were put into the Materials Dispatcher jobs and promoted into supervision. Obviously, this was not a pleasant start for most anyone to face. However, Shirley took that as a challenge to learn, to pull her weight, and not ask for favors because she was a "lady" – as one General Supervisor said, "They want the job, so let 'em do it!"

Through the next 15 years, Shirley worked her way through various levels of weekly and salaried positions within the Weapon Materials Management organizations. She was one of the first two females in the production end of the plant that were promoted to a "front line supervisor" position. She worked primarily in the enriched uranium operations and facilities.

In 1989, she was selected to replace a retiring icon, Ray Guinn, who had managed the Enriched Uranium Metallurgical Operations within the Metal Preparation Division for many years. The fear of jumping into a new career, moving from managing materials to the responsibility for actual manufacturing (casting, rolling, forming, machining and transporting enriched uranium materials) which entailed the management of ~ 200 employees at peak times, did not stop Shirley from tackling her next challenge.

Upon arriving to the predominantly male environment which then employed men at least 6'5" tall, Shirley preceded with her management style of learning from the folks that really do the work, involving the organization in planning and new projects, trusting the fine men and women (there were a few female chemical operators) to do the right thing, and do it right, and showing appreciation for the work well done!

When the Cold War ended, the nuclear weapons production work came to a screeching halt. This left hard-working employees with no mission and much uncertainty. The Dismantlement of the "secondaries" produced at Y-12 provided some work for Y-12 but had historically been performed by the Disassembly craft.

Looking for productive and interesting work for her group, Shirley convinced management that her employees could perform some of the dismantlement work in their area and do so much more efficiently and timely, due to facility advantages. The next challenge was facing the Disassemblymen who were waiting on the steps of her building one day when she arrived to work.

Again, the committed determination to "where's there's a will, there's a way" provided the strength for her to negotiate with the hourly crafts. Shirley presented the challenge to the two unions/crafts – the Chemical Operators and the Disassemblymen- to find a solution that would allow both groups to perform work in Shirley's facility. When asked what Shirley had to have (the number of dismantled units), Shirley replied that she had to have a certain number dismantled each day (the number was 5 times what had previously been done).

Numerous people assured Shirley she was spinning her wheels, but she continued to have confidence in the union folks that they would develop a suitable decision. Shirley assured the guys that when they dismantled the specified number she'd given them, they could go sit in the break room if they liked until time to go home.

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Well, the two crafts came up with mutually-acceptable process that met Shirley's criteria, put it in place, excelled at the dismantlement process, and Shirley defended to management why she had hourly workers sitting in the break room, almost daily. Ironically, the success of these craftsmen allowed the United States to meet dismantlement schedules that were jeopardized by another site's interruption of dismantlement work, because of safety concerns.

The workers completed the dismantlement of this particular program far ahead of schedule, under budget, and greatly reduced the hazardous waste generated from the process. Again, where there's a will, there's a way!

When the Cold War ended, huge quantities of highly enriched uranium were being returned to Y-12 at an accelerated rate. To manage this new storage mission, the Defense Programs Director requested Shirley to transfer to a new organization and build a program called the Nuclear Materials Management and Storage Program.

The emphasis was on finding safe, secure storage space for all the nuclear materials returning to Y-12. Shirley's program quickly realized a new storage facility had to be built. In 1996, Shirley began negotiating, pleading and arguing for a new storage facility to store the nation's inventory of high enriched uranium.

As a direct result of the great support from the Department of Energy/National Nuclear Security Administration, and numerous Y-12ers, Y-12 eventually received authorization to build a new facility. The Highly Enriched Uranium Materials Facility recently was completed and the public was allowed to view this highly secure facility. Shirley's dream has come true as this new facility has been completed and will be operational in the near future. I doubt that Shirley had exactly this facility in mind when she started dreaming as the changes that have taken place since her original attempts to find suitable secure storage for what she calls "HEU."

Through the years, Shirley has been asked to perform complex assignments, often beyond what one might consider within her job description and responsibility, but was fortunate enough to have "learned from the best" and built upon each career move to enhance her knowledge and capability to climb the ladder to the next challenging assignment. Her dad would be proud of her!

She has been recognized throughout the Nuclear Weapons Complex for her ability to work effectively in a diverse team, think out of the box routinely, and not be limited by what other people might think she was capable of doing. And, finally and most importantly, she is known for her philosophy of never ever giving up. She knows it is because she is always remembering, "where there's a will, there's a way" as her dad instilled in her long ago.

Shirley continues to mentor and support numerous employees throughout the working environment and continues to learn new elements of the nuclear business. She retired from the Y-12 site in 2004 and began working with a small business, Haselwood Enterprises, Inc., where she continues to support Y-12 and other DOE/NNSA sites where her historical knowledge of the site and its huge inventory of legacy materials continue to be very useful.

While working full time and building her career at Y-12, Shirley attended night school and eventually earned her Bachelor's degree in 1992 – again, never giving up, always believing, "where there's a will, there's a way".

Shirley Oden Cox is a prime example of someone who refused to be limited. She was and is willing to work hard, tackle difficult tasks with enthusiasm and to stick to the task until it is completed in a satisfactory manner.

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Such leaders are sorely needed in our workplace today. She is an encouragement to young people who are just coming into the workforce as she proves by her life that individuals can achieve great things, if they truly believe and practice "where there is a will, there is a way!"

Thank you, Shirley, for sharing your story. I am proud to call you my friend and I greatly admire your successful career. Shirley and I worked together for several years in one of the primary production areas of Y-12 – she was in operations and I was providing her maintenance support. She was my customer and we got a lot of work done, that's for sure. I knew if Shirley asked for something, she needed it done. I think she knew that if she asked me for something, it would be provided.



Shirley Cox on one of the many occasions she was promoted to higher levels of responsibility at Y-12