

MEET Deborah Wright-Harris



Deborah Wright-Harris joined the IAPD Executive Committee in 2016 after serving on the IAPD Board of Directors for three years. She's also active in IAPD government relations efforts, having participated in the Plastics Industry Fly-In each year, plus she is an advocate of the IAPD Plastics Political Action Committee (PAC) and is a member of the PAC Board. We had the chance to sit down with Wright-Harris to discuss her career path and how the performance plastics industry has impacted her life.

What do you do for Polymer Industries?

I'm currently the national distribution sales manager for Polymer Industries. My job is to try to grow our business through the distribution channel, which is very important to me. When Polymer Industries moved over to the distribution channel, that's when our major growth started.

What career did you think you would have? How did you start out?

My father worked in the education system until I was 18 years old and I thought I would be a teacher. When I was 13, my father bought a restaurant and I was automatically thrown into the business. When I graduated from high school I went to junior college to become a teacher, but I was trying to work full-time to pay for my education and I was distracted. I left school for a few years, and then I came back when my son was three years old. When I took evening classes, I still worked and my husband took care of my son so I could go to school. I had almost finished my education and just had my practice teaching to finish when my father was diagnosed with cancer. So I left school again to run the restaurant. After my father passed away, my husband and I, along with my mother, ran the business.

How long have you been with Polymer Industries?

I started on January 5, 1989. At that time, my husband and I had adopted four children and we needed good insurance. We were self-employed and self-employment insurance didn't meet our needs. Polymer Industries had an opening for a receptionist, and I knew that they offered the insurance our family needed. Andy Saigal, the president/owner of Polymer Industries, came into our restaurant every day. When I heard of an opening at Polymer Industries I approached him because we needed the benefits, and that's when I went to work as the receptionist at Polymer Industries.

But you weren't the receptionist for long, right?

No, no. Shortly after I started they had a sales tax audit. I helped because I had some experience in finances through my father's restaurant. I started working in payables and receivables, then I started handling customer problems, and so I began dabbling in inside sales. Soon I became an inside salesperson. I went through all the jobs at Polymer Industries: operations and accounts payable and receivables, everything in the office. I eventually became office manager and it led to other things. After Rohit Saigal, vice

president of sales and marketing, joined the company, I started concentrating more on sales because that was my calling. My passion is working with people and I get to do that with my job.

One of the most empowering moments for me happened when the oldest Saigal son, Ashoo, vice president of operations, joined the business. One day he called me into his office and said, "Everything we've given you, you've done well. What do you see in your future? What do you think you could do for Polymer Industries?" And in that moment I realized that what I can become was in my hands, and that I could make a difference. I took a day to think about it and the next day I went in to see Ashoo and said, "Okay. The company's grown too much. I think we need to start a purchasing department." And I became the purchasing manager. Then I became the human resources manager and now I'm the national sales manager. Through all of those changes, I knew that if I train the people underneath me and made them able to take over from me, that there was always a stepping stone to something else. The Saigal family runs that business as a family business, and we all feel like we are a part of that family.

It's so nice that you were able to chart your course like that.

Yes. And I feel like I still am. When I had an interest in joining IAPD and volunteering on committees, I was nothing but encouraged. They've always supported me in doing what I want to do in the association. They've given me the opportunity to prove myself, and that's where a lot of companies miss the boat. I could still be the receptionist. I could still be in accounts payable and accounts receivable. But they give everyone the opportunity to prove themselves.

What advice would you give to somebody who might not be familiar with the industry, or might be thinking about and looking into jobs in the industry. What would you tell them?

I had absolutely no experience in plastics. The owner of Polymer Industries came into my restaurant and I got to know him, but I knew nothing about what the company manufactured. I walked into Polymer Industries with an open mind, and I decided that I was going to make my career there. I'm so thankful now that I threw myself into every area of the company. But the most important thing was that I made it mine. I tell everyone that I don't own the company, I just think I do!

I tell people to keep an open mind. Be willing to embrace change when it comes along. Don't be afraid of it. Don't be afraid of sharing your knowledge with those under you. If I hadn't shared that knowledge with people who were growing through the company, I wouldn't be where I am now, because they'd have been afraid to take me away from those jobs. I always made sure that someone was there who could take my place.

When opportunity comes, show everyone, "Hey, I can do this. I'm willing to do this. I want to do this." Show them the desire. I can't give credit to anyone more than I can Andy Saigal. I always felt that he trusted me and that he had confidence in me, and that in itself gives you the feeling of ownership and empowerment. And then Ashoo more or less said, "You draw out a map for your trip through Polymer Industries." Then Rohit came along, and he wanted me to do what I enjoyed doing the most, which was working with customers and building relationships and that's what it's all about. I love every day because I have never had two days exactly alike. The one thing I enjoy most about it is that I have made friends in the industry who are true friends — and will always be my friends outside — and that I truly love the people in the performance plastics industry. And I love what I do.

My heart is with Polymer Industries and the employees of Polymer Industries because that is my family. I'm not just responsible for sales. I feel like I'm in a very valued position to where my input is respected. There's nothing better than that. And that can be true for anyone who loves what they do. If you ask me, I have the best job with the best bosses in the world.

Competitors are my friends. Customers are my friends. IAPD members are my friends. I get to go and spend time with my friends all-day long. I have done

things that I enjoy doing, and I certainly have a passion for making distribution what the world of plastics is about.

You've definitely made a difference within your own company and also within IAPD.

The opportunity with both Polymer Industries and IAPD has been tremendous. For example, I'd never considered government relations before, but that very first fly-in lit a fire in me that I didn't know I had. And I got involved. I called the governor's office. I called the senators' offices. I arranged a town hall meeting at our plant in Henagar, AL, USA and that just spurred it on. And now, I have good relationships with Alabama legislators. Senators know me by name. I want to see the IAPD Plastics PAC grow, and see IAPD do more with government relations. I think that is the next way to fuel the fire for the future of the performance plastics industry.

Now my desire is to bring together the people who are graduating from college, and the people graduating from business schools and sales colleges. Let's face it, children aren't thinking, "I want to be a plastic salesman when I grow up." That's not even on their radar. My next thing is to be able to present to them a forum where they can learn about the performance plastics industry. Our goals should be to get the new generation involved in the performance plastics industry.

I have been fortunate enough in my life to have had two wonderful husbands who believed in me. These two men, Lowell Wright and Guy Harris, believed in me with all their hearts, and eventually I believed in myself as well. That is the greatest gift a person can be given. To be loved, trusted and cherished.