



BREAKING BARRIERS

BRIGHT SPARKIE PAVES WAY FOR WOMEN IN MINING

As a young woman growing up on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, becoming an award-winning tradesperson wasn't what Sharee Yamashita had in mind for her future. But in her early 20s, stories of a female cousin's work as a diesel fitter piqued Yamashita's interest. Not one to shy away from a challenge, it was the idea of succeeding in a 'non-traditional' industry that motivated her to apply for an electrical apprenticeship at Rio Tinto's Weipa operations on Western Cape York.

"If you were to ask me 10 years ago what I would be when I finished school, I definitely would not have said 'an electrician'," Yamashita says.

"I saw the ad in *The Bulletin* and I knew my cousin had gone and done the same program as well.

"She inspired me. And so did the challenges, I suppose, of being in a male-dominated industry."

When Yamashita started her apprenticeship, she had never laid hands on the tools she now uses on a daily basis. She had to develop a high standard of physical fitness to be able to work outdoors for long periods of time, on platforms and using heavy machinery. Despite feeling intimidated and out her element, Yamashita was determined to make it work.

"So in the first year we had to build a tool trolley," she recalls.

"It was the first time I picked up an oxy cutter, the first time I picked up a grinder, the first time I welded."

"It was really daunting... [but] I just gave everything a go. And if your tradesmen see that you're willing to learn, they're also willing to teach you."

ON SITE: Sharee Yamashita at work at Rio Tinto's Weipa operations on Western Cape York. (Credit: SBS)

Fast forward four years to 2017 and Yamashita has completed her apprenticeship, secured a full-time position as a female electrician with Rio Tinto in Weipa, and won the 'NAIDOC Apprentice of the Year' title. Yamashita believes the award is testament not only to her excellence as an electrician but also the challenges she has overcome to get where she is today. When Yamashita was 17, she and her partner had a baby daughter who is now eight years old. Some people in her community expressed disapproval about her becoming a mother at such a young age. At first she felt "a bit crap" about the reaction – but ultimately it hardened her resolve to succeed.

"Growing up on TI [Thursday Island], shame is a big issue," she says.

"I suppose all the negativity and judgmental comments just kind of pushed me, made me determined and made me hungry."

“If you were to ask me 10 years ago what I would be when I finished school, I definitely would not have said ‘an electrician’,” Yamashita says.



“And I suppose I wanted to also make sure that my daughter has a good life as well.”

After having her daughter, Yamashita completed her schooling by correspondence, thanks in part to her mother’s insistence.

“I was back in Cairns living with a relative and there was no way that I was gonna just quit school,” she says.

“Mum wouldn’t let me.”

Having to spend significant chunks of time away from her family was one of the toughest aspects of completing the apprenticeship, Yamashita says. She was required to attend TAFE in Cairns for several months a year, while her partner and daughter remained in Weipa.

“I struggled. I just got homesick. I was missing the family more than anything,” she says.

“I suppose I just kept telling myself that it’s worth it.”

Luckily, Yamashita and her partner have a wonderful support network in Weipa, including her dad and brother, and a group of friends and colleagues who she says have been integral to her success.

Winning the NAIDOC Apprentice of the Year title means that Yamashita has been catapulted into the position of role model for young women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who

are considering a career in ‘non-traditional’ industries. The softly spoken yet quietly confident Yamashita says her success “still hasn’t really sunk in, to be honest”. But she is proud of what she’s achieved and hopes that her journey can serve as inspiration to other women thinking of pursuing a trade.

“I’d love to see how my story makes a difference to someone else’s life,” she says.

Every now and then Yamashita gets the chance to return to Thursday Island to visit her mother, three of her sisters and extended family. Employment options are limited back home, so she feels that pursuing a career on the mainland is the best way for her to provide a bright future for her daughter.

“Home is always gonna be home. But, yeah, here in Weipa there are heaps of opportunities for job employment,” she says.

“I know for me that was the best option.”

Yamashita’s employer, Rio Tinto, has an ‘Elevate’ Reconciliation Action Plan, which is the highest phase achievable in Reconciliation Australia’s Reconciliation Action Plan program. The plan sets targets across areas such as Indigenous employment, education and training.

In Weipa, Rio Tinto operates under three Aboriginal agreements: the Western Cape Communities Co-existence Agreement, the Ely

Bauxite Mining Project Agreement and the Weipa Township Agreement. These agreements outline formal consultation processes between the company and Traditional Owners, and their aspirations to work together to create long-term mutual value. The Chair of the Ely Bauxite Mining Project Agreement Coordination Committee, Linda McLachlan, says relationships between community and business are key to realising reconciliation.

“The intent behind reconciliation isn’t something we can achieve individually,” she says.

“It’s a movement where communities actively work together towards a better future for everyone.”

McLachlan says Yamashita’s story should serve as an example of the possibilities that are created by gaining a trade.

“Trade qualifications open doors to different careers,” she says.

“[Yamashita] overcame many challenges and is a great role model for our local communities here in Cape York.”

As for what’s next, Yamashita says she is focused for now on honing her skills and gaining more experience. She has been invited to tell her story at schools and public events, and looks forward to doing what she can to help other young women chase their dreams.