

Keeping Her Eyes on the Horizon

LUCKILY FOR THE FIRE PROTECTION ENGINEERING INDUSTRY, MORIEL KAPLAN TURNED OUT TO BE A LOUSY BARTENDER. Kaplan, vice president and practice leader for JENSEN HUGHES, would go on to lead the sprinkler system design for three wedges of the Pentagon after the September 11 attacks, perform risk analyses for super high-rise structures in the Middle East, and serve as the go-to fire protection consultant for a major retailer.

But that was not the original plan.

“As a kid, my dream was to travel the world and work hotel-based jobs to pay the bills,” Kaplan says. “I went so far as to get a bartending certificate. The only problem was, I wasn’t very good. I started as the Friday night bartender and was quickly moved to NASCAR Sundays and 25-cent wing nights — when the patrons almost exclusively ordered beer.” The money she made only lasted long enough for a four-month backpacking stint through Europe.

At about that time, a friend recommended that Schirmer Engineering (later Aon FPE and JENSEN HUGHES) consider hiring Kaplan. The job turned out to be a great fit.

“This job was much bigger than what I had been doing,” she says. “And I got to travel, so that was awesome. I worked in places such as Ecuador, India, Poland, Canada, Dubai, and Tajikistan on a variety of projects ranging from government to hospitality. If I felt I was no longer learning, there was always something else I could raise my hand for to gain a new skill.”

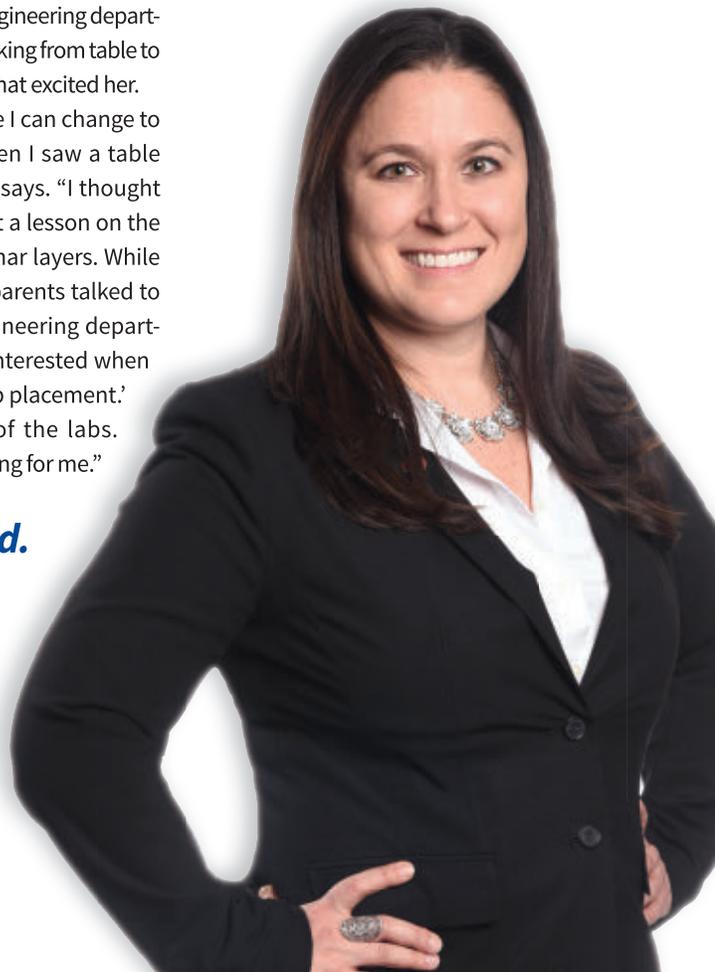
And as it turned out, “I was actually able to leverage some of my bartending skills into people skills and sales skills,” Kaplan says. “I’ve never been one for having a single career path or goal. I move forward, build on what I’ve done, and constantly look for new ways to grow personally while helping the community.”

Looking for New Ways Forward

After being accepted to the University of Maryland, Kaplan went to an open house featuring all the university’s engineering departments. She remembers walking from table to table not seeing anything that excited her.

“I was thinking, ‘Maybe I can change to an art history major,’ when I saw a table making s’mores,” Kaplan says. “I thought it was the snack table, not a lesson on the insulating properties of char layers. While I waited for s’mores, my parents talked to a member of the fire engineering department. My mom became interested when she heard ‘100 percent job placement.’ Off we went on a tour of the labs. That’s when it got interesting for me.”

Kaplan graduated from the University of Maryland in 2001 with a bachelor of science in fire protection engineering. She earned her master’s degree in fire protection engineering in 2007 from the University of Maryland. She has also earned her Professional Engineering (PE) license, held several SFPE Chesapeake Chapter officer positions, and received the SFPE Hats Off Award in 2006 for assisting with the high school FPE science education program.



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with a Focus on Prevention

From there, her willingness to take on new challenges and learn new skills provided her a wide array of experiences and professional development.

“I moved around a lot. Sometimes I was working as an engineer, sometimes I was managing engineers, sometimes I took roles in other related departments,” she says. “I like to learn a new skill, practice it for a while, and then I get excited and go find something new to try to increase my overall knowledge and uncover ways we can do better.”

In recent years Kaplan has moved into corporate management roles.

“There is a part of me that absolutely loves the work and wants to be the one out there doing it,” she says. “But there’s also a part of me that realizes we can’t advance the science of safety if the business side isn’t run effectively. We can do more — we can have more engineers in the field — if I’m doing this.”

The Only Engineering We Need

Kaplan says people often assume she works in the fire service when she starts telling them what she does.

“They think I’m a firefighter,” she says. “I have to explain that we design safety into the built environment long before an incident ever occurs. In fact, we hope no one will ever use our designs. We hope no one has to run into a burning building to save people because we saved them 10 years ago when we designed this or that.”

It’s that kind of prevention that interests Kaplan the most.

“This is important work. Fire protection is the only engineering you need,” she says. “Every other discipline helps us build what we want and be more comfortable, more profitable, and more efficient. We need fire protection to save lives.”

Engineering is in Kaplan’s blood. Her father served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is one of the reasons she was so proud to be able to give him a tour of the Pentagon and show him the work she was part of. “My dad was career Army. It meant so much to me to be able to show him what we did,” Kaplan says. “I got to show him that I was doing what he did. I made it better for the people coming after us.”

Looking Ahead

Natural disasters is an area where Kaplan sees significant opportunities to make things better.

“In most buildings, fire alarm systems are the only systems that can effectively reach everyone,” she says. “Fire alarms are already

used to alert people to tornadoes, active shooters, or other catastrophes. We can go further in applying all types of protection already in use to building a safer world.”

She says much of her current work is focused on safety and risk reduction by looking at human actions during catastrophic events in hopes of better understanding them.

“It’s not just wildfires or the fire hazards that come along with other natural disasters, it’s the events themselves,” she says. “Hurricanes, mass flooding, earth, wind, water, and fire. They are getting worse. They are causing more damage, requiring more expensive repairs, and affecting more lives.”

“In our circles within our industry, we’re starting to understand it can’t be just reaction,” she says. “We need planned protection. Our work can and should overlap with other engineering disciplines and related specialties to enhance the safety built into our future. ▲

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