

Dr. Elaine T. Cullen
“Country Girl Makes Good”

From milking cows on her family dairy farm to the stifling heat of underground hard rock mines to accepting a Telly Award for her documentary exploring the 1972 Sunshine Mine fire to creating her own safety consulting company, Elaine Cullen has been an example for women in safety for over 40 years.



“Mining chose me”

While attending Gonzaga University Elaine’s work-study program set the stage for her career. She was an English Literature major who was working in the computer lab. The Bureau of Mines in Spokane had been using the computers at the college for statistical analyses. Elaine became interested in the mining industry during her work-study program while assisting in the computer lab.

The Bureau decided to purchase its own computer after receiving funds from the Mine Safety Act after the Farmington Mine disaster and they offered Elaine a job. She said no thanks-but only for a while. She joined the team and was put to work writing computer code for a new project in underground coal and analyzing accident/injury statistics for mining in general. She found the people in mining fascinating -- their work ethic, the work conditions, the culture of mining as a whole. She began to realize that the incident data that she was analyzing actually represented real people. She began to put names to faces, not just numbers. This was the “ah-ha” moment in her career. Her lifelong desire to help was born and she decided if there was anything she could do to help save miners’ lives she would do what ever she could. She knew at this time that mining had chosen her.

“You’re A Good Hand”

There is no doubt that mining is a man’s world. Dr. Cullen knew this from the beginning. When she began working in the mines it was actually illegal for a woman to work underground. Since she worked for the government she was exempt from this rule. There were no other women in her field, however, which left her feeling pretty isolated. There was no one to look to, to pattern herself after, of whom to seek advice. Her first supervisor gave her a chance to work in a mine, even though he knew he was going against the norms of the culture. He explained to her how difficult her job would be-not only physically but also the terrific challenge of breaking through the forbidden frontier of the mining fraternity. He could not do anything to make this ground breaking any simpler, but he did support her and took a great deal of criticism and many accusations over having a woman on the team.

Over the years, Elaine learned and moved up in the research community, until she had her own projects to develop “effective” training for miners. The Bureau of Mines had been abolished by Congress, but the Spokane Lab and their colleagues at the Pittsburgh Lab were moved to NIOSH, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

NIOSH funded her work to develop new training materials, and she hit the road with a video crew, to capture the wisdom of experienced miners and use them in a series of training videos. Working with the mine crews meant working long hours, and in the same conditions the miners worked around. This often meant “doubling back”, working double shifts if necessary in order to capture the footage needed. It also meant working in very hot, muddy environments, or cold, windy ones. A hard core, well respected miner (gate keeper) watched her closely. She worked beside his crew, accepted their traditions and culture, respected their knowledge and abilities. This acknowledgement of who the miners were and what they did gained her invaluable acceptance and trust. The miners, who generally assign nicknames to everyone on their crews, dubbed her the “Stope Goddess”, and competed with each other to be in her films. Once the gate keeper accepted her, the rest of group allowed her inside the inner sanctum. The gate keeper told her “you’re a good hand”. This is one of the highest compliments she ever received.

“You are My Sunshine”

Northern Idaho is rugged, untamed and provides a treasure trove of natural resources. The Sunshine Mine is located in the heart of the panhandle. The miners who worked there were like the land...rough and unforgiving. These men worked the land as their profession and as their passion. In 1972 there was a terrible fire and 91 miners lost their lives in one of the worst mining disasters of the 20th century.

Dr. Cullen journeyed to the Sunshine Mine 30 years later. As she gradually won the trust and respect of the miners, tongues loosened, eyes moistened and the memories flowed. Nightmares and horrors kept hidden over the years were released to an intelligent, kind, petite and caring woman. She was able to touch a place in survivors that previously had been buried as deep as the ore they mined.

Elaine asked the crew if she could divulge their story. They were proud for her to share this piece of their history in the hope that one life might possibly be saved and that no-one else would have to go through what they did. The Stope Goddess produced a documentary entitled “You are my Sunshine” that was featured on PBS, and has been used world-wide. This chronicle of resilience and the strength of the human spirit was honored with a Telly Award, the highest honor for a documentary film. To this day this is Dr. Cullen’s most rewarding work in her professional career.

Earn It

Dr. Cullen’s career has been challenging, exciting, at times frightening, inspiring, and fulfilling. In her beginning there was no “glass ceiling”. The limits for a woman might as well have been a brick wall. By working underground, side by side, hour by hour, with some of the strongest, most stoic and impenetrable workers she was able to gain their respect and trust. She is currently working in the Oil and Gas Extraction and Production industry, and has found these workers to be very similar to miners...hard working and fun-loving. Her advice for women in the safety world today is to work your way through the trenches by getting out in the field, working beside the experts, earning their trust and respect by giving it first.

