Alumni Profile:  
Alicia Boler-Davis
As senior vice president of global quality and global customer experience for General Motors, Alicia Boler-Davis (’91) travels the world to ensure excitement and reliability each time customers step inside their vehicles.

Back in the late 1980s, however, Boler-Davis was a typical undergraduate, undecided about her future and overwhelmed by coursework. She loved chemistry, but an internship at a chemical company convinced her that she wouldn’t be satisfied working alone in a lab. She was challenged by the difficult chemical engineering curriculum and by juggling a full course load with a part-time job. Tough it out, she told herself—a mantra that also helped her rise in a male-dominated industry and pioneer a more customer-focused culture in a century-old company.

“Throughout my career I have always gone back to the memory of when I was in school and found ways to overcome challenges, when I had setbacks and persevered,” she says. “You have the greatest opportunity to contribute when you stretch yourself.”

It helped that Boler-Davis was always focused: she knew she wanted to be an engineer from an early age. Growing up in Michigan, she excelled in math and science. In high school she participated in a six-week engineering program at what was then the General Motors Institute, taking college-level courses, visiting plants and laboratories, and picturing herself as an engineer.

Boler-Davis chose Northwestern because of its location and its reputation with minorities in engineering. She participated in the program that eventually became EXCEL, where students interested in minority issues come to campus the summer before freshman year to get a head start.

“I built relationships from the moment I stepped on campus,” she says. She chose to major in chemical engineering and met several alumni who were successful in research and development and in sales. “I loved that you could do many things with a chemical engineering degree, because I wasn’t exactly sure what I wanted to do,” she says. “And I loved organic chemistry”—a comment rarely heard in the halls of Tech.

In her free time Boler-Davis could be found at the beach with friends, cheering at Wildcat football games, and serving as chairwoman of the National Society of Black Engineers, an early chance to develop leadership skills. “I found you don’t just tell people what to do. You need to figure out how to get them to buy into what you’re trying to do,” she says. “That has helped me tremendously in the workplace. You don’t know you’re getting those tools in your toolbox until you have to use them, and then you find out you’re very well prepared.”

Northwestern’s wide curriculum honed her whole-brain engineering skills with classes in sociology and African art. “My goal was always to be a balanced engineer who had strong technical skills but who also had great interpersonal skills,” she says.

She joined General Motors as a manufacturing engineer in 1994 after spending a few years as an engineer for pharmaceutical and food companies, and she traveled the country to help with new tooling product launches. But in order to learn more about GM operations, she asked for an assignment in a plant—an unpopular choice for many engineers because of the demanding people-oriented work.

After a year working on production and launch schedules, Boler-Davis became a plant production supervisor in charge of 50 employees. Approaching the job as an engineer, she created lists of daily duties but learned that in a plant where problems arose quickly and needed to be solved immediately, she needed a new approach.

“I wasn’t just an engineer anymore. It was less about me and more about what I was able to get done with my team,” she says. “I had to be an effective leader to communicate what needed to happen each day.”

Boler-Davis found she was good at being a plant supervisor—she liked the people, the pace, the challenges—and by putting in long hours and making data-driven decisions she continued moving up the ranks until she became the first African American female plant manager in 2007.

“When I was moving up at GM, there were very few female plant managers,” she says. “There were no African American females at all in leadership roles. Some people had the reaction, ‘Wow, you’re a woman and you’re black; what can you do?’ But once they get over that initial reaction, they judge you on your capabilities. People knew I delivered results and did it by engaging the team.” Several more women have since followed Boler-Davis into leadership roles at GM.

In her current role Boler-Davis travels the world to examine customers’ every touch point with GM to ensure the company is exceeding expectations. Her role combines product design and development with the consumer experience of the product, which has helped her improve GM’s customer awareness. “I see the full value chain from concept to production to ownership to when the customer is back in the market for another vehicle,” she says. “It is huge to see that and be able to affect our next products.” Boler-Davis has observed a “transformation” among GM employees, who are now passionate around delivering great products and experience for our customers.” The redesigned Chevrolet Impala earned Consumer Reports’ highest score among sedans, a rare feat for an American car.

When she’s not working, Boler-Davis spends time with her husband and two sons, volunteering in the community, and traveling, including visits to Evanston for Homecoming.

Her success motivates her to keep moving forward. Her next goal is to help refine GM’s global strategy before implementation.

“I’m excited to have this opportunity,” she says. “I have a lot to do.”

Emily Ayshford