ON A MISSION, GIVING BACK

Cynthia Quarterman ‘83 puts her McCormick education to work keeping Americans safe and enabling others to follow in her footsteps.

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Cynthia Quarterman (’83) looks out for your safety every day without you even knowing—and that’s just the way she likes it.

As administrator of the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), Quarterman oversees the safe transport of hazardous materials throughout the country by air, land, and sea. Thanks to her agency’s work, Americans can routinely cross over underground gas and oil pipelines and drive past trucks and trains hauling hazardous materials without a concern for their personal safety.

“I like to tell people we’re the most important agency you never heard of,” she laughs. “That’s rewarding to me, to know that we’re there on a day-to-day basis fulfilling our mission without anybody ever knowing it.”

With 2.6 million miles of pipeline and about 1 million shipments of hazardous materials each day under its purview, the PHMSA fulfills a huge mission with a relatively small amount of resources. “We have less than 500 people and a budget of around $200 million,” she explains. “But I’m always interested in a challenge.”

With her education in industrial engineering and law, Quarterman has blended her technical expertise with legal acumen throughout her career. Prior to her service at PHMSA, she was partner in the Washington law office of Steptoe & Johnson, specializing in regulatory and industry affairs related to transportation and energy. She also served on the Obama administration’s transition team at the Department of Energy and as director of the Department of the Interior’s Minerals Management Service.

Drawn to engineering by her love of math and science, Quarterman remembers how welcoming Northwestern was to a young woman very far from her Savannah, Georgia home.

“The support of the University community is like nothing I’ve ever seen—it’s just a great place to go to school,” she remembers. “I’ve used the skills that I learned there every day, not only here at a federal agency, but also when I practiced law. Because I’ve tended to be involved in very technical areas, it helps a great deal to have an understanding of the underlying concepts of engineering.”

Quarterman says she’s very grateful for the scholarships and grants that made her dream of a McCormick industrial engineering education possible. She’s also dedicated to ensuring that other deserving students realize their dreams as well, regardless of their financial circumstances.

“Having had the great blessing of the opportunity to attend Northwestern, I’ve become a continuing contributor and supporter of the school,” she says. “I want to make sure others have the opportunities to do what I’ve done.”

SARA LANGEN