



AIR FORCE TECHNICAL APPLICATIONS CENTER

Office of Public Affairs ** 1020 S. Patrick Drive, Suite 4222
Patrick Air Force Base, Florida 32925
(321) 494-7688 * DSN 854-7688 * aftac.pa@us.af.mil

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Release 18-11-06/001
Nov. 6, 2018

AFTAC molecular biologist represents Air Force at SWE18 conference

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – A molecular biologist assigned to the Air Force Technical Applications Center here represented the Air Force at the Society of Women Engineers' annual conference Oct. 18-20, 2018 in Minneapolis.

Julia Ignacek, deputy director of AFTAC's Strategic Integration Directorate, was invited to serve as a panelist during a session entitled, "Leading Innovation in the Public Sector: Perspectives from NASA, the Army and the Air Force."

The Society of Women Engineers, or SWE, hosts the world's largest conference for female engineers across the globe. This year's theme was entitled, "Let's Break Boundaries" and focused on discussions on workplace culture, gender bias and women in STEM leadership roles.



"The conference itself breaks boundaries by being the largest gathering of women engineers across all major engineering disciplines," Ignacek said. "Sometimes, we are so focused on our own specific area of expertise that we fail to look beyond our disciplines for answers and solutions. Participating in events like SWE18 is a great opportunity to speak with seasoned professionals as well as graduating students in the early stages of their career to understand each person's perspectives and concerns."

Ignacek, who has a bachelor's degree in microbiology and molecular biology and a master's degree in research administration, was one of three subject matter experts on a panel discussion where she fielded numerous questions from those in attendance.

"One question in particular stood out in my mind because it touched on so many aspects that are of concern to many women in engineering fields today," she said. "The person asked, 'How have you seen government agencies place a greater value on innovation, and how does it translate to greater opportunities for women and under-represented minorities?'"

Ignacek eagerly responded to the audience member's question.

"I stated that it doesn't matter if you're in private industry or government – technology is advancing at an ever-increasing speed and the outcomes are increasingly consequential. If you don't innovate, you will either lose market share or you will lose your strategic edge over your adversary. You must be able to bring the future faster and do it at the speed of relevance."

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She continued, “At my organization, we encourage empowerment and innovation at all levels in the workforce, focusing on agility, speed and diversity of thought. Companies that commit to fostering a culture of innovation will seek to build diversity in their workforce and this translates to greater opportunities for women and minorities in historically male-dominated disciplines.”

With more than 14,000 in attendance featuring 300 worldwide organizations, the conference attracts prestigious leaders and champions of industry and academia to encourage women to achieve their full potential as engineers. This year, SWE18’s keynote speakers were Cindy Kent, former president and general manager of 3M’s Infection Prevention Division; Marillyn A. Hewson, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Lockheed Martin Corp.; and Kim Underhill, group president of Kimberly-Clark’s North American consumer business.

Ignacek’s panel included Dr. Alexis McKittrick, research staff member for the Science and Technology Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. (panel moderator); Col. Michelle Link, assistant program officer for U.S. Army Logistics; and Roslin Hicks, deputy director for NASA’s Michoud Assembly Facility.

“I was honored to be asked to represent the Air Force at the conference, and I’d like to thank Randy Mieskoski (HAF/A1), Rose Day (AFTAC recruiting), Jennifer Abman Scott (SWE Board of Directors), and AFTAC senior leadership for allowing me the opportunity to participate in this incredibly rewarding conference. There is so much to learn when we open our minds to other perspectives, and I believe we grow both personally and professionally from these opportunities.”