

Texas Student and Graduate Profile

When Lelia Warner was suddenly on her own, raising three junior high and high school children, she had no idea what the future would hold. Deciding she needed more tools in her tool kit, Lelia enrolled at Victoria College in Victoria, Texas, in 2006. Although she had no specific direction in mind, Lelia decided to take an introductory networking class and soon discovered she took to networking “like a duck to water.” She subsequently enrolled in the Cisco® Networking Academy® and today, is successfully employed as the network specialist for Fort Bend County Libraries.

Lelia has overcome her share of challenges both inside and outside the classroom. In addition to working a full-time job, going to school, and single-handedly running a household while raising teenagers, Lelia had to overcome the challenge of being one of only a handful of women in the academy, and the only older woman returning to school.

“It was difficult breaking into the networking field as a middle-aged woman” says Lelia, but she is now confident that “with this experience under my belt I can go anywhere and obtain any job.” Plus, having surprised herself with her achievements, Lelia now enjoys surprising others and seeing their reaction when they learn she is the networking administrator.

Lelia recalls a day when she walked into the classroom and discovered a male classmate had already cabled her router for her. When Lelia asked him why, he replied “Well, because you’re a girl!” Determined to maximize her learning experience and do it on her own, Lelia made it clear that she would not be requiring any help. She followed that up with being the first one to scramble up the ladder to pull wires through the ceiling, and soon the rest of the class became entwined in friendly competitions that made the class even more fun.

In retrospect, Lelia recalls feeling intimidated by a classroom full of men, but her drive to learn the material and determination to face her fears got her through. Having demonstrated she was a force to be reckoned with, Lelia continued to work hard, earned an associate of science degree and an associate of applied science network administration degree, and then transferred to the University of Houston at Victoria where she earned her bachelor of science degree in computer science, information systems.

Then came the challenge of job interviews. Lelia had interviewed for various positions and, even though she was qualified, it took her almost one year to secure her current position. She remembers all too well sitting across from inattentive male interviewers who were not about to give a newly-minted, middle-aged, female graduate a break in a male dominated industry. She persisted, and is now working at a company which runs its network on Cisco equipment where she says she feels right at home.

Lelia attributes a large part of her success to the labs and to her Networking Academy instructor. Says Lelia: “Sharon Wagner was very encouraging and made the course fun. We played Jeopardy against each other to instill knowledge of terms and protocols and she held competitions to see who could get their network up and running first. Sharon was able to create an environment where students could learn through trial and error, giving instructions and turning the students loose, but always there to help students learn through their mistakes. She even allowed the students to perform the upgrade for the academy lab equipment.” Lelia enjoyed the hands-on experience of being able to actually configure a network



from scratch and the satisfaction of watching it come up and “talk” across the wires. She also enjoyed surprising herself by what she was able to accomplish.

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As Network Specialist at the Fort Bend County Libraries, Leila is in charge of the network, routing, switching, servers, firewall, and security for all eight library branches. “I have been involved in configuring and bringing up two new voice over IP switches in the network and I have also been involved in adding network modules and configuring existing routers in order to bring up new T1 lines to existing library branches. We will be adding two more library branches onto the network within the next two years and that is an exciting adventure on the horizon.”

With the library expansion and the possibilities that her college degree and networking knowledge and experience have created for her, Lelia is excited about future opportunities. “It was difficult breaking into the networking field as a middle-aged woman,” says Lelia, but she is now confident that “with this experience under my belt I can go anywhere and obtain any job.” Plus, having surprised herself with her achievements, Lelia now enjoys surprising others and seeing their reaction when they learn she is the networking administrator.

Outside of technology, Lelia enjoys traveling, fishing, camping, and sewing. Her children are now grown and on their own and extremely proud of their mother. Her advice to others who may be interested in the Networking Academy is, “Go for it. ... If you have an analytical mind, enjoy command line type of computing, and can ‘see’ the big picture as far as being able to picture a network and analyze what is happening, then success will abound in the Networking Academy.”

Lelia also hopes to encourage and inspire other women with her story and offers women an additional piece of advice: “If your goal is to be out there with the guys, then you can’t accept help. ... There are ways to carry equipment that use leverage rather than brute strength ... and women can learn to use tools!”

To learn more about the Networking Academy at Victoria College, go to: <http://www.victoriacollege.edu/workforce/cis/>



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