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Women as Game-changers in Mining | Philippine Mining Luncheon Message by Kate Digdigan

Ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply heartened to see such a huge attendance for today's Philippine Mining Luncheon. I would like to thank Diwata and its president, Atty. Patricia Bunye, for organizing this successful get-together of the country's leading female game-changers in the mining industry.

Good afternoon, everyone. I am Kate Digdigan and I have been in the mining industry for almost ten years – 90 percent of which I have been with my present company, TVI Resource Development Philippines Incorporated or TVIRD. Five years ago, I assumed the post of Resource Geologist and I am currently responsible for creating mineral resource models for the company's projects. I am also responsible for mine reconciliation studies, estimation of mine life and technical due diligence on prospects. In addition, I conduct field data quality control and occasional fieldwork.

I have witnessed the full cycle of TVIRD's flagship project - from its early exploration in Canatuan, Zamboanga del Norte, to seeing its operations coming on-stream, and to the final conclusion of its mining activities, which happened recently.

I have also been privileged to play an active role in the company's successful operations as well as its various community engagements and environment programs that paved the way for Canatuan's sustainable development.

In my line of work, the usual industry pick-up line is: "What is a woman like you doing in an industry like this?" I usually encounter this every time I declare that I am a geologist. And whenever people ask me this question, I would jokingly tell them it is because most men are already taking-up nursing! So I guess it is fair enough that women penetrate and excel in a previously male-dominated profession.

But seriously though, I chose to stay in this profession because in spite of being a woman, I found my place in the mining industry.

Early experiences

As a fresh graduate, it took a while before I convinced my boss to send me to the field. My first stint as a professional geologist was spent conducting grass roots exploration at TVIRD's Tamarok Copper Project which is also located in Zamboanga del Norte.

Together with another female colleague, I was sent to conduct mapping and rock chip sampling. At first, the senior guys on the team were not really comfortable in the company of lady geologists in the field, given all the safety and security concerns as well as risks present in Mindanao. Now, TVIRD did not earn

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its safety recognitions for nothing. On top of that, the company deeply values its female resource.

But apart from that, we cannot really blame the men for their discomfort. Having female staff in the field meant having to construct separate wash rooms, separate bedrooms, taking more stopovers during travel, needing additional local staff to assist us in carrying rock samples and so on.

But despite all these, we were confident that we could perform at par with the men on the field due to our practical trainings during our years at the National Institute of Geological Sciences of the University of the Philippines. We were trained to conduct geological mapping, use geologic instruments, dig rocks and collect samples on our own. We also admire our lady professors who are field geologists themselves. Aside from the technical know-how, we were also taught what to expect during fieldwork and were trained on how to survive life in the bushes.

While I do acknowledge the significant contribution of many great men to the mining industry, I also believe that women bring great value to the work place. This value contribution is called “intuition.” Female intuition combines forward-thinking, instinct and character with sympathy, consideration and a meticulous attention to detail.

Ladies and gentlemen, women bring a lot of “heart” to the workplace. And the men would have to admit that a little female intuition has kept them from making the wrong decisions whether on the job or out of it.

TVIRD acknowledges the fact that women are able to rise-up to the challenge and perform equally well in the field of exploration. In fact, after our first field assignment, my female colleague and I were then assigned to six-week rosters at separate projects to conduct more exploration work such as drilling supervision, core logging and geochemical sampling, among others.

Empowered women

Another milestone in my career was when I landed the opportunity to work abroad and gain more experience and exposure to international best practices. This was my brief stint outside of TVIRD.

In 2008, I joined Australian mining company Phu Bia Mining Ltd. in Laos. During my tenure as a Mine Geologist at the Phu Kham Copper Project, I felt more empowered seeing how the company recognizes the potential of women. I marveled at Laotian women driving 100-tonner-trucks – women were even trained and allowed to drive around the mine!

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I represented my boss in various meetings. I was tasked to draft procedures for the Geology Department. I provided inputs in monthly reports and attended various trainings. Our skills were valued and our minds were constantly challenged. It was a turning point for me as I realized that I DO HAVE a future in this profession.

Changing the game

After acquiring skills from my stint in Laos, I requested to be hired back at TVIRD. I was then appointed Senior Mine Geologist during the company's sulphide project in Canatuan.

Looking back, the Mines Department was driven by an all-female staff. With me were two mining engineers, three mine geologists, a geodetic engineer and a GIS specialist – all of us women!

Together, we operated the mine, which had a very complicated and massive sulphide orebody. We drafted procedures in grade control, ore mark-up and ore blending. We even re-interpreted the orebody, improved block models and re-designed mine plans. We worked hard to arrive at the optimum ore feed that the mill could process efficiently. Finally, from as low as 11 percent recovery in the mill, we were able to increase the copper recovery to about 95 percent! We were able to convert marginal ore to additional reserves through proper blending. But most of all – and as a result of this – TVIRD was able to produce and meet its shipping requirement schedule.

We knew right then that we were not only breaking into a stereotypical man's world. We actually made it more fabulous!

The game HAS definitely changed and it is also largely because of girl power.

Changing court

Now what happens next when you start having kids? Would you still conduct fieldwork? I asked myself these questions upon learning that I was expecting. The game just got more interesting for me...

I actually thought of quitting my job as I did not want to risk my pregnancy on one hand; but on the other hand, I did not want to be called a Senior Mine Geologist who does not go out to the open pit to do grade control. I knew that when I give birth, as a mother, I would prefer to be with my family everyday instead seeing them every six weeks, which my job then entailed. But most of all, my husband is also a geologist who works abroad on a roster like myself.

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I am fortunate that TVIRD is very supportive of its staff and that management is confident in my capabilities and potential as a geologist. I was then appointed Resource Geologist – a designation assigned to the Makati head office and one that is more suitable for my current status. It is a post I have held for the past five years to date, during which time I have also begun studying for my Masters Degree in Economic Geology at UP.

Nonetheless, and despite my changing role in life, I am still aware of how critical my job is. A resource geologist's projections on the economic potential of certain projects become the basis of the company business strategy. The estimated life of mine, which I declare based on the resource models, affects the overall business model of the company. Owing to this, I take my job as seriously as I take motherhood. A mining project also needs to be molded, to be nurtured and cultivated in order for it to reach its potential.

This, my dear audience, is how a woman treats a project. With a little foresight – and a lot of heart – women are able to change the game and change along with it. Moreover, women are able to innovate and evolve in a progressive industry where the proverbial glass ceiling is a thing of the past. Proof of this is our female CFO, Ms. Lily Ann Panelo, and our Vice President for Corporate Services, Ms. Yody Marzo, who is also a proud member of Diwata (motion to Yody).

Today, as the industry faces various challenges, I consider myself fortunate to be part of this defining moment in our corporate history.

On the home front, TVIRD is looking forward to ramping-up operations in Balabag in Zamboanga del Sur, and in Agata in Agusan del Norte. Back in Canatuan, as women played a vital role in the early days by institutionalizing genuine community engagements, women today continue to make good on a promise that TVIRD made close to 20 years ago – and that is to ensure the long-term sustainability of Canatuan in the years to come, especially for the indigenous Subanons to whose trust in TVIRD we dedicate our success.

And our women will continue to work hard to ensure this. Our female environmentalists, chemists, community relations personnel, foresters, lawyers, accountants and other licensed professionals – and yes, we have a female Subanon nurse too – all of us will work hand-in-heart with our male colleagues to take our company and our industry even further into the 20th century.

Ladies and gentlemen, the mining industry's future is going to be an interesting one. And with women on board, I assure you...it's gonna be *fabulous!*

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Thank you and good afternoon to all!