

# ‘I want to help others progress’

As part of our Women in Energy series, Allister Thomas spoke to BP’s Aleida Rios, vice president for operations in the Gulf of Mexico

**Q. Tell us a bit about your background and how you have come into your position with BP?**

A. I graduated from Texas A&M University as a chemical engineer in 1991. My career with BP began before that, before my college freshman year in fact. I did four summer internships at BP Amoco, as I had to work to fund my education. Those summers included going to the oil fields in west Texas. This was quite a life-changing experience for me, given my Hispanic culture. Those four summer internships were critical, as I fell in love with the work and with engineering in the field.

I have now been with BP for 26 years.

**Q. You were appointed operations manager while seven months pregnant. What was that like?**

A. This was a defining moment for me in my career, and what I thought was a moment of real progress in action. I was offered a site operations manager’s position while pregnant with my second child. It gave me an amazing amount of confidence at a time in my life when I was thinking “can I do this?”

That job was being offered to me purely based on my capabilities. I believe I have stayed in this job because of the confidence I got from my mentors that I could do it. And that was 18 years ago now, very early on in my career. The person who offered me that job was someone I had a great level of respect for and that was a pinpoint moment.

**Q. Are there any other challenges you would highlight as a working mother in the oil and gas industry?**

A. When my eldest child was six months old, BP was in desperate need for an engineer to work on an emergency in the field, and at the time I was nursing my son. My husband managed to secure an industrial breastfeeding pump so I could take it to the field and continue to ship milk back home to my son.

When I got to the field, I told the logistics manager I needed a refrig-

erator, and when he asked me why, I told him it was because I needed to pump breast milk and keep it cold before shipping it. Then he went above and beyond, in giving me privacy and making sure my milk reached home on time. A big learning point here was that people will always help when you ask.

**Q. Could the industry be more flexible around issues such as maternity leave?**

A. I think there is always more that can be done. BP has taken significant strides in their maternity and paternity leave policies, allowing more flexibility to both mothers and fathers. BP has also been a strong advocate for women and that creates a culture and expectation that people will be treated equally and fairly from entry level onwards.

Thinking more broadly about diversity and inclusion and what more can be done, I think it’s around the public advocacy for D&I. What I mean by that is things like the #HeForShe campaign. Most of the conversation about gender equality tends to be women talking to women, but I think we need more males in the discussion. Diverse talent can only thrive in an inclusive culture where everyone is valued and treated equally with respect and dignity, without any form of discrimination. There are more similarities between men and women and what we need is a gender inclusive culture, free of discrimination for everyone.

**Q. Could you tell us about some of the initiatives you’re involved in to help women and people from minority backgrounds progress their careers?**

A. I am very active in this space. I am on the BP Women’s International Network (BP WIN) Executive Steering Committee. BP WIN is one of 13 employee networks, voluntarily set up by employees for employees. Its goal is to support and drive BP’s Diversity and Inclusion Ambition to foster an inclusive workplace. I am also part of the leadership council for BP’s Million Women Mentors programme, which is a national initia-

Aleida Rios



tive to mobilise one million mentors to inspire girls and women to pursue careers in STEM. I am also an executive sponsor for BP’s Hispanic Business Resource Group, Energia, and the Champion for the Gulf of Mexico Women’s Council.

Every opportunity I get, I try to use my experience and knowledge to help others to progress. I am a big advocate of this, whether it be to mentor, to coach or to promote.

Sometimes involvement is the only thing needed to get people engaged and believing in themselves. You will find me in all sorts of STEM advocacy groups.

**Q. Could more be done to bring young women into the industry by getting them involved with STEM?**

A. Definitely. If we were to look at the figures, I am guessing there has been little change in the industry since I began my engineering career. I think BP has made more progress than the industry, specifically oil and gas, although there is more to do. We are recruiting nearly an equal number of females and males in our early careers programmes, more than 45% of new recruits are female. But there is more to do in retaining and progressing women into senior leadership roles.

I am a fierce advocate for STEM

education and promoting women in positions of leadership. In the context of International Women’s Day, I think we need to keep progressing the agenda around STEM careers and women in leadership. I don’t think we will ever have parity if positions of the highest responsibility are not available to women. Collectively we can all play a part in a gender inclusive world – we must never be complacent and must continue to press for progress with every action. I have a strong belief that education is one thing we have in this world that creates parity and opportunities for progress.

**Q. How big a role do you see the next generation of women playing in the energy sector?**

A. A huge role – but the key is to make sure we continue with the progress that has already been made. For me, progress means always looking forwards. Progress can be daunting and it does take a long time. We cannot give up and must continue to focus on the momentum.

To give you an example, there are four BP operated assets in the Gulf of Mexico and they each have a site leader, an OIM, the most critical operations role, and I am proud to say that two of those positions are women, which is the first time ever in

the Gulf of Mexico. That is the sort of progress we need to see across the industry.

**Q. Do you hope that your career could be viewed as an inspiration for women and people from minority backgrounds?**

A. If my career and story manages to inspire women and people from minority backgrounds, then I think that can only be positive for the industry. Given my background, I have a very specific passion for using my experience to help others progress and create opportunities for Hispanics and women in positions of leadership.

Inspiring others is one thing, but providing the support and mentorship to develop through their career is also vitally important. Early in my career, I always had mentors and coaches that have been an amazing support system for me. I have always had leaders above me that focused on the quality of my work rather than the fact that I’m a woman. BP has made me feel that I can be myself and bring my whole self to work. That included when I was the only female in the field, or when I was pregnant three times in close succession, or when I speak Spanish at work. I have always felt I could be myself and that has allowed me to perform to the best of my abilities.



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