

TAMMY WRIGHT

Ditching Stereotypes

Angel figurines hang from her dining room chandelier. She fries turkeys, her specialty, for her family and friends at Thanksgiving. She loves shopping and planning parties. And as the first woman ever to serve as a crew leader at Storm Water, Tammy Wright spends her days knee-deep in weeds, litter, and brush, clearing a path for water in the City's extensive system of ditches.

Wright, 40, is one of just three women ever to work on a Storm Water crew, and she has served with the department longer than any other. Wright received this year's Ebenezer Stevens nomination, an honor she also held in 2001. "She steps up to the plate," Operations Manager Donell Davis says. When a supervisor recently took an extended leave, Wright assumed his role in addition to her crew leader work.



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Being the only woman on the Storm Water crew doesn't faze Wright. The Portsmouth native has been tackling physical, male-dominated jobs her whole career, starting with a tank cleaning job at Norshipco. She joined Storm Water as a maintenance worker in 1996, became an equipment operator in just a year, and was promoted to crew leader in 2001.

The mother of two teenage girls considers herself an equal to the men in physical ability, and Davis says she isn't afraid to get dirty. "She carries her own," Davis says. "She came in with an attitude where she wasn't expecting any help. It was, 'I can do this, too.'" She immersed herself in the department, serving on multiple committees and volunteering for standby shifts.

Wright says that the motto "safety first" guides her management style, and unlike some crew leaders, she allows her workers to get the job done in their own style, "as long as it gets done." Davis describes her as a team player, and Wright enjoys the camaraderie of the crew. "We all pull together," she says.

Wright, who hopes to work her way up to supervisor, attributes her success to a strong work ethic and respectful communication. "I treat people the way I want to be treated," she says. Wright remembers a time when she was on the receiving end of that philosophy early in her Storm Water career: A female supervisor gave her the opportunity to train on ditch-cleaning equipment, leading to Wright's first promotion.

A self-described strong woman who hasn't begun to slow down, Wright hopes that her career has cleared a path for other women to succeed at Storm Water. But hers is a tough act to follow. "I get the job done, whatever needs to be done," Wright says. Even if that means clearing stoppages until 11 at night, which she has done once already this summer and will no doubt do again.

- Jane Vaughn