



Michelle Ferbraché

Essendon Panels

WE INTRODUCE MICHELLE FERBRACHÉ, ANOTHER OF THE INDUSTRY'S NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS, AND DISCOVER A WOMAN OF PASSION, DETERMINATION AND PANACHÉ AS SHE BLENDS A FAMILY APPROACH WITH HER CORPORATE FLAIR.

I began by asking Michelle to tell us a bit about her background by way of introduction. As far back as she can remember, Michelle was always looking to break the mould and seek out excitement. Her dream was to become a fighter jet pilot, so at age 15 she joined the Australian Air Force Cadets. The following year she completed her first solo flight, and in her final year of High School she applied to the Military Academy. Michelle recalls: "I discovered I was 1.5cm too short to be a military pilot, so I applied for a Qantas cadetship. However, when September 11 happened that same year, the cadetship was no longer an option."

However, she was still drawn to aviation and her first job was for Air Services Australia in their publications centre tending to pilots, which included ensuring they had all their required documentation up to date. When the business and the role relocated to Canberra, so did she, although she returned to Melbourne to help run her father's manufacturing business for a couple of years.

The fascination for aviation was never far away, and in 2005 she applied for a role with Air Services Australia as a Flight Data Coordinator, which restarted her career with the organisation.

"I was tempted to seek out an Air Traffic Controller's position but

thought at the time it was too monotonous for my personality and entrepreneurial spirit, so I moved into a role as an Airways Data Specialist, which suited my natural affinity for numerical analysis. I then went on to become an Aviation Safety Investigator." And all this whilst she was still in her twenties!

Michelle left Air Services Australia after 11 years and is

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looking forward to regaining her pilot's licence once she has some spare time. She also currently holds a motorbike licence. "I have always been a speed demon and a car enthusiast – striving to achieve the best car in the carpark – as I really appreciated the quality and experience of the cars I was driving."

Following a career in aviation, we discussed how she found herself in the collision repair industry. "I was always keen to start a business and an

opportunity presented itself with this run-down panel shop here in Essendon.

Initially, I was reluctant to proceed due to the significant investment required to bring the business up to a satisfactory level.

However, my entrepreneurial desire got the better of me and I took the plunge."

Michelle created the business plan based upon the principles of safety, quality and service and in 2017 the business attained VACC accreditation, really by having the right attitude, a passion for success, and by taking a more corporate

approach to running a small business.

Michelle speaks candidly about her greatest achievements as a professional businesswoman. "It's difficult to single out any one event, but I look back at the progress I made in the predominately male-oriented aviation industry, which I see as a really a great achievement, particularly as it all began when I was still in my teenage years."

In a broader sense, Michelle sees achievement more like, "How far can I push myself, how much can I pack into this life and how many people can I affect positively along the journey?" She believes this stems from her ability to focus on the positives in times of adversity, maintain her vision and always focus on the opportunities rather than the challenges.

I take the discussion back to 2018 when Essendon Panels won the VACC Best Body Repairer, then went back-to-back in 2019, and asked Michelle what this means to her. "It really does bring a smile to my face as it shows that the industry is strong, vibrant and full of opportunity. However, and I mean this with all due respect, the industry is not as mature as the aviation industry in terms of safety as there are key issues that have yet to be addressed."

She was quick to say that winning the awards are, of course, a team effort and reflect the commitment of everyone who works at Essendon

Panels. Success is seeing her employees thrive, seeing her business thrive and seeing the industry evolve and adapt in the changing automotive landscape.

Michelle feels a great sense of satisfaction in this recognition, although she hopes it will lead to an opportunity to take a more meaningful role in the collision repair industry and work for positive change addressing some of the key issues. As a prime illustration, she believes that if a collision repairer does not have access to OE repair procedures, they should not be repairing vehicles.

MICHELLE'S ADVICE TO OTHER WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRY REFLECTS HER OWN JOURNEY AND EXPERIENCE.

When I press her for what Essendon Panels does differently, she is very clear. Their number one priority is safety: safety for their employees and, of course, putting the car back on the road safely. They do this by providing the highest quality repairs with the highest level of customer service. "However, based on my experience, I believe the industry really needs more structure, regulation and legislation, with the requisite level of accountability. I lived and breathed this in my aviation days, and I've seen

the benefits first-hand. It's this culture of accountability you will find at Essendon Panels."

They have strong relationships with genuine parts suppliers PM Parts, Zagame and Rex Gorrell, all of whom have also been great supporters of the business. In addition, they have other key suppliers who continue to support them with great products and advice, including AkzoNobel's Sikkens Autowave 2.0, a very solid Masterbooth spray booth and their straightening equipment from global leader, Car-O-Liner. So, from this perspective, they are in very good hands.

We then moved on to the topic of automotive technology, and again Michelle draws parallels with her aviation background. "We all know that today's vehicles have as much technology as modern-day aircraft, but we are putting 'untrained pilots' in the cockpit and putting the repair and maintenance in the hands of, predominately, 'untrained engineers'."

She added: "At Essendon Panels, to ensure we put these vehicles back on the road safely, we use genuine parts, OE-approved repair procedures and for recalibration we rely on the manufacturer's dealer. Now, I recognise that we have limited visibility as to what happens in the dealership, but where the industry is today, this is our best option. As service providers we must ensure the customer has confidence in the repair,



Essendon Panels – great street appeal.



2018 Best Body Repairer - Small Business.



and to further reinforce – safety always comes first!”

Michelle points out that as human beings we become easily conditioned, so when we realise the collision avoidance technology will intervene in emergency situations, we become conditioned to expect that it will happen every time. However, if the technology is not repaired and calibrated correctly, the flow-on effects can be catastrophic. It is the responsibility of the repairers to get it right every time! Again, she suggests, perhaps there is a role for a regulator such as the ATSB (Australian Transport Safety Bureau) to get involved in the automotive sector.

As the VACC 2019 Best Businesswomen in Automotive, we asked Michelle how she would encourage more women to join the industry. “Young women today are taught to be independent thinkers, and the collision repair industry is so rich with opportunity for those with analytical minds to make a mark. Those studying the STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] subjects will find some great roles, particularly with the technology we’ve already discussed. We need to get the message out to those in early high school to generate their interest from a young age.” Michelle also suggested that to make this happen, the industry needs to act in unison and those in positions of influence have a great responsibility to take the lead. If we get it right, we will have more women in the industry.

It would have been remiss of me not to have asked how they are coping with the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, and again Michelle is adamant. “There is no doubt that the work pipeline has slowed down significantly. However, for me failure is not an option. We have already implemented risk-mitigation strategies to ensure we survive; we are thinking outside the square when it comes to marketing and, of course, we are managing our cash flow more closely than ever. This is very much a situation of ‘those that have the ability to adapt will survive’, and Essendon Panels will survive –

even if it means hibernation.”

It will not be surprising that Michelle sees great opportunities in the coming years. “I think the way we operate as an industry is very dealer-centric, so one of my objectives is to champion the cause of the independent operator. I recently applied to join the VACC Body Repairer Division to enable me to make a more meaningful contribution to the industry, particularly in the area of post-repair vehicle safety.”

She also believes that one of the great opportunities for all of us is to get the old and unroadworthy vehicles off the road, which she is convinced will go a long way to achieving the TAC “Towards Zero” initiative. This in turn will further “professionalise” the industry and bring the focus back to technology and the flow-on effect of attracting new talent, perhaps even

accelerating the generational change. “This will really change the landscape and we must create a picture of what the automotive industry will look like in five to ten years and, as I mentioned, market the opportunities to the younger generation who will, of course, be the future of our industry.”

Finally, Michelle’s advice to other women in the industry reflects her own journey and experience. “Firstly, have a vision, know your true value and self-worth, be passionate in everything you do and, most importantly, be brave – never be afraid to speak up for what’s right. These are the things that will create opportunity, enhance your motivation and lead to you to be recognised as a serious businesswoman in the collision repair industry. These in turn will lead to your personal and professional success.”



The Essendon Panels Team.



Michelle with VACC President Fury Bortolotto and VACC Industry Policy Manager Dr Imogen Reid in 2019.