

Cherrie Felder Elected Chair of Waterways Council, Inc.

By April-Hope Wareham



We've all experienced the stress that aging marine infrastructure puts on our supply chain. With around 80-85% of all the locks on the inland waterway system past their 50-year life expectancy, The Waterways Council, Inc (WCI) exists to ensure funding that is set aside for repairing locks, dams, and other inland waterway infrastructure is utilized to its full capacity. This nonpartisan, nonprofit organization has helped move forward the repairs of millions of dollars of infrastructure on our inland waterways system, and we are proud to announce that Cherrie Felder, a WIMOs member out of our Southern Louisiana chapter, has recently been elected the first female chair of WCI.

Cherrie was raised on a ranch in Mississippi, and in a roundabout way, it's that part of her story that got her into the maritime industry in the first place. After graduating from Vanderbilt University with a degree in African Art, Cherrie found herself at the New Orleans Museum of Art cataloguing their African, Oceanic and Northwest Coast American Indian Art collections. While at the Museum she attended a reception to kick off a new rodeo in New Orleans. After volunteering at the first rodeo, she was chosen as the executive director of the New Orleans rodeo.

Unfortunately, "New Orleans is not a rodeo town," and the rodeo was terminated after its third year. However, Cherrie had met Dennis Steger, Chairman of the Board of the New Orleans Rodeo – who at the time owned Lower Miss Marine Service, a maritime brokerage company – who was impressed with her work ethic and enthusiasm. He insisted that friends leaving Ingram Barge to start the Marine Division of Torco Oil Company hire her, and Cherrie was hired as their Office Manager.

It quickly became apparent that Cherrie could do much more than manage Torco's New Orleans office. "I just fell in love immediately with the industry," she says. Cherrie took advantage of every opportunity she could and moved from managing the office, crew changes, grocery orders and boat orders to managing operations and customers. She even took the opportunity to work in sales to further understand what customers needed and how the business worked.

By the time Torco sold off all its assets in 1982, Cherrie had made a name for herself in the industry. She worked for St. John Fleeting, then Marine Inland Transportation, and finally Blessey Marine. When her husband was diagnosed with cancer, Cherrie took some time away from work to care for him. Unfortunately, he passed away in 2000. By this time, Dennis Steger – the same man who had helped Cherrie find her way into maritime in the first place – had started Channel Shipyard and suggested she come to work with him. Cherrie took his offer and has worked for Channel ever since. She currently holds the role of Vice President of Channel Shipyard Companies. In 2017, Cherrie received the Seamen's Church River Bell Distinguished Service Award and the National Rivers Hall of Fame National Achievement Award.



Cherrie now represents Channel Shipyard not only as Chair of WCI but also as the Treasurer of the Coast Guard Foundation, the Secretary of LAWS and on AWO. "As long as the Steger boys let me work, I'm going to work!" she laughs, and her passion for this industry and ensuring funding for inland waterways restoration and infrastructure projects is infectious.

As Chair of WCI, Cherrie helps to do just that. WCI includes carriers, shippers, agricultural groups, and more. "What makes us so effective is the diversity of our membership," she explains. With labor, environmental, and agricultural groups involved, this organization uniquely situated to work with lawmakers from all political parties and geographies in the US. "They all care about the waterways," Cherrie says, regarding the bipartisan nature of WCI. Ensuring funding set aside through the Inland Waterway Trust Fund and the general treasury (our taxes) is the next step. While the money is earmarked for these projects, prioritizing and ensuring spend can be difficult, and that is where WCI comes in. It can be said that Cherrie Felder, as Chair of this organization, is working to secure the future of the maritime industry in the United States and has probably helped each of us who works on the water in ways we do not even know.

