

Interview with Gretchen Gillis – 2022 AAPG President



DGS would like to thank Miss Gretchen Gillis for sharing her thoughts with us. The purpose of this interview is to highlight the journey and achievements that lead you to become the president of the American Association of petroleum Geologists (AAPG).

Q1. Why did you choose to be a geologist in the first place?

Gillis: My father was a chemical engineer working in oil and gas refineries and LNG. His career led my family to travel to several countries including Algeria, Indonesia, and Kuwait. Because of this, I was always interested in a career that allows me to see the world. I didn't realize geology would be the right path until I started my undergraduate studies when my sister advised me to take a geology course and I found it very interesting. On the other hand, my mother was an English teacher and that helped me tremendously as well later in my career as a geologist.

Q2. Was it challenging to find a job as a female geologist?

Gillis: I decided to earn a master's degree before looking for a job. I studied at University of Texas which led me to start my career in the oil and gas industry. Finding a job was not as challenging as being a woman in the industry because there weren't a lot of women in the industry when I started. One of my tips is to join a supportive network of women. Finding a mentor at an early stage is important. The older I get, the more I value the company of women because I just think their support is really healthy. There are a lot of supportive men but we still have to support each other as women.

Q3. How did you progress to become the president of AAPG?

Gillis: AAPG has always been the society I most belong to, but I also belong to SEG and SPE and other organizations. As a student, I was reading the AAPG Bulletin. Then, I got involved in the activities of AAPG when I started working as a professional geologist in a communications role. I realized then that volunteering at AAPG would help me tremendously in my career. I progressed to joining the publication committee where I held several positions, including the vice chair and then the chair of the committee. Then I became the elected editor which was a wonderful job with a lot of responsibility. Because I was actively volunteering in these societies, I learned early on how to run meeting efficiently, how to motivate the team to increase the productivity especially for volunteers. My dear friend Mr. Sa'id Alhajri said motivated me to run for president, so I have him to thank (or blame!) for me being the AAPG President.

Q4. How did AAPG expand your network?

Gillis: I am interested to know what other people are doing in this industry, because I learn from them. During my 13 years working for Schlumberger, one of my tasks was to report about new technologies. My perception was that a lot of the new technology was first used in Saudi Aramco because Saudi Aramco is a leader in implementing new technology. So, I started knowing more people from Saudi Aramco, and eventually I joined Aramco Americas.

Moreover, as a geologist, having a global network is very important because the scale of our science is the whole Earth. We have to look beyond our borders to understand the full picture of geology.

Q5. Have you had the chance to attend any activities organized by our local chapter Dhahran Geoscience Society (DGS)?

Gillis: Yes of course! The level of engagement is terrific. DGS has a lot of people that are actively volunteering to ensure the success of society. The level of skills is impressive and with each generation we achieve more and expect more from our young professionals. I am so proud to see more women joining Saudi Aramco who are strategic thinkers, unafraid to express their ideas, and very competent at their job. This makes me optimistic about the future of women, Saudi Aramco, and geoscience in general.

Q6. The whole oil and gas industry is moving into sustainable energy, what does AAPG offer to support this cause?

Gillis: AAPG has a lot of initiatives including an active sustainable development committee, a sustainable development competition for both undergraduate and graduate students, a whole division of environmental geoscience, and even the Imperial Barrel Award (IBA) is adding sustainability as a new category in the competition.

Q7. How do you see the future of the oil and gas relative to the sustainability goals?

Gillis: Throughout my career, I've seen the oil and gas industry constantly moving towards cleaner energy. There's a continuous effort into becoming more environmentally friendly and reduce our carbon footprint. In fact, the pandemic showed us how important the oil and gas industry is for medical tools, which depend in most cases on plastic.

Q8. Any last message to the DGS members?

Gillis: I really enjoy visiting DGS events. Collaboration is a great way to exchange our knowledge. Networking is important especially since we've been isolated for the past two years, which is a long time for young professionals not to be interacting with the society. Lastly, volunteering is a lot of work, but the benefits and learnings outweigh all the effort and time. Thank you and hope to visit you soon.