





**CAPT (SEL.) KATE HIGGINS-BLOOM, USCG**  
**CDR LIZ DURIKA, USN**



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# SISTER SUCCESS *in* SISTER SERVICES



**CDR Liz Durika, USN**

## STEM, Humility, Strong Sense of Purpose: Their Secret to Success!

BY BRIANNA LATRASH, ANNIE LAURIE LATRASH & FRED LATRASH

**T**HIS IS A TALE OF TWOS: Two sisters, two sister services, two officers, two military wives, two mothers and two success stories. CAPT (Select) Kate Higgins-Bloom, USCG, and CDR Elizabeth “Liz” Durika, USN, Civil Engineer Corps (CEC), sisters, are both highly qualified and operationally tested in their fields and attribute their success to superb parental role models and their STEM education.

The American Society of Naval Engineers was able to complete our fun and inspirational joint interview with both sisters. As one gets to know Kate and Liz, it quickly becomes obvious their family, and especially their bond, are the foundation on which their success has been built. Their passion was infectious as they shared experiences and perspectives on the positive impact of a STEM education and the importance of strong role models.

Kate is the director of the U.S. Coast Guard’s strategic foresight program at the Office of Emerging Policy, where she is the living embodiment of the Coast Guard’s motto, “Semper Paratus.” She has held a variety of operational leadership roles, including Command Center Chief, USCG Sector Hampton Roads; Incident Management Division Chief, USCG Sector Boston; and Commanding Officer, USCG Cutter (USCGC) *BARANOF* as well as serving on-board USCGC *TYBEE* and USCGC *BEAR*.

Her impressive track record ashore includes service as a Federal Executive Fellow at the Brookings Institution,

White House Fellow and Acting Chief of Staff, Department of Homeland Security Office of Legislative Affairs.

Kate graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering, and later earned a Master of Public Administration from the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government. She’s a member of the 2020-2021 cohort of MIT Seminar XXI.

Kate lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband, CDR Zack Bloom, USNR, and their two children.

Kate’s sister, Liz, is equally well known among the U.S. Navy Civil Engineer Corps community. Currently assigned as an Assistant Operations Officer for Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Mid-Atlantic, Liz is responsible for six installations in the Hampton Roads Virginia Beach area. Liz earned this position following successful facilities and acquisition assignments, at the Public Works Department Oceana; Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Africa; Naples, Italy, Guam and Hawaii. Excelling in both her staff and expeditionary assignments, she commanded Construction

Battalion Maintenance Unit TWO ZERO TWO from 2015 to 2017. Liz graduated and commissioned from the Naval Reserve Officer Training Program at Carnegie Mellon University with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering and later earned her Master's in Engineering Management from Old Dominion University. Liz is a qualified Seabee Combat Warfare Officer, registered Professional Engineer, member of the Defense Acquisition Professional Community and a member of the Carnegie Mellon Civil and Environmental Engineering Alumni Advisory Council. She is married to CDR Nathan Durika, USN, and is a proud mother.

*“ The background I had as a civil engineer really helped me for all the reasons you probably appreciate: the ability to reason, work as a team, identify and solve critical problems, build insight into workable solutions and getting accustomed to being productive. —Higgins-Bloom*

## Perspective on Role Models

**Liz:** Kate and I both have very similar thoughts on the topic of mentors and role models. They can come in all shapes, race, seniority and gender. You need to find somebody you click with. Kate and I have both had male and female role models who have been bosses or other people we've worked with or met over the years. We have stayed in touch, and they have guided us as mentors.

### *Who were your most influential role models?*

**Liz:** Throughout my career I have met many inspirational role models. As a young Lieutenant, I worked as an admiral's aide and I still call him more than a couple of times a year to seek his mentorship and to catch up. Not only do I consider him a great mentor, but also a close friend. However, I give the 'top honors' to our awesome parents and extended family. We are the children of a naval officer; our dad is a retired submariner. We moved around a lot and our parents always placed a priority on education, researching schools before a move to ensure we attended those that provided the best opportunities. Our parents worked very hard to make every spot we lived in



**Left: Higgins-Bloom's husband, CDR Zack Bloom, and their two children; Right: Durika's husband, CDR Nathan Durika, and their two children.**



feel like home. I lived in seven places by the time I graduated high school, and Kate had a couple more under her belt. They encouraged us to take the hardest classes and most challenging opportunities. My parents fostered a love of learning, and I credit them with our success.

**Kate:** My sister hit the nail on the head. Our parents had high expectations, so we had high expectations for ourselves. Although they never said explicitly, "You should be an engineer. You should go to a service academy. Or you should join the military," they encouraged and inspired us to consider a career in service. We also took a lot of inspiration from our broader family, particularly our grandparents, who epitomized the idea of service. Our grandmother helped people at her church and in the neighborhood. Our two grandfathers, both World War II veterans, put their education on hold so they could serve, and did so in a variety of ways for the rest of their lives. They truly loved what they did, and it showed.



**ENS Kate Higgins-Bloom, USCG after Law Enforcement Operations aboard USCGC Bear.**



**Liz Durika as the Water Well Officer-in-Charge in Kenya, Africa (2007)**

*Did any teachers take you under their wing to push you in a STEM direction?*

**Kate:** I had an amazing AP Calculus teacher, she was phenomenal. I had always been strong academically, but thought I was going to be a lawyer as I had a passion for writing and arguing. My AP Calculus teacher changed my perspective. She spent time with each of her students and made us realize that we could be really good at calculus and enjoy it.

*“It was not an obligation for Liz and me to serve, it was an aspiration!”*

*—Higgins-Bloom*

**Liz:** We both just really clicked with our AP Calculus teachers because they displayed a joy of teaching. As an undergraduate, I attended Carnegie Mellon, which has a small Civil Engineering program. Every professor there was fabulous. Larry Cartwright, the undergraduate lab facilitator, did a great job of making engineering tangible, palpable and relevant across the board. He had a way of keeping us all engaged.

**Kate:** The U.S. Coast Guard Academy was a small school with a tiny civil engineering class but had phenomenal instructors. They took time with the students to make sure we understood the material and made it fun along the way. One of my favorite teachers and my academic advisor, Dr. Zelmanowitz, now the head of the Civil Engineering Department, was very influential. She transformed abstract concepts into interesting ideas.

*“We learned how to learn by being engineers. We are problem solvers. Engineering teaches you to be a better team member, to communicate, and to understand critical path or root cause analysis to get to a solution. That is why I enjoy being an engineer and why I encourage people to pursue engineering.”*

*—Durika*

*How did you inspire and motivate each other?*

**Liz:** Kate truly is my best friend. We text multiple times a day and on deployment, pre-smartphones, I called her quite frequently from Guam, even when she was deployed to Bahrain. She was a sanity partner, somebody I could just vent with, or ask, “Hey, am I making the right decision?” When it’s your sister, it’s just that much better!

**Kate:** We were always close as kids. We moved a lot, so often we were each other’s first friend in any given neighborhood. As we got older, we continued to have a strong relationship. Liz pretty much saved my life for about two years while I was stationed alone in Portsmouth, Virginia with a newborn while my husband was stationed in Washington, D.C. with our two and a half year old. I lived a block away from Liz, and there were so many times I had to rely on her. Having somebody like that in your corner makes all the difference.

## **Reflections on a STEM Background and Its Impact on Career Progression**

*In what ways did a STEM education contribute to each of your success stories?*

**Kate:** While I have a civil engineering degree and I am proud of my engineering roots, I have not been a practicing engineer. I started out as an engineer, but followed a more afloat operational track and served as Commanding Officer of a ship before changing tracks and becoming a Responsive Ashore Officer, specializing in interagency safety, security and emergency management across the maritime domain. Right now, I work at the





Office of Emerging Policy, which is essentially the Coast Guard's strategy shop and is home to our strategic foresight program. My career path is pretty unusual; many of the jobs I have had did not exist when I was commissioned. In some ways, my path has followed the evolution of the Coast Guard over the last 20 years.

**Liz:** I took a different path. I am a registered professional engineer and a Navy officer in the Civil Engineer Corps (CEC), the Navy's professional engineers and architects' group. In the CEC, we usually have three specific areas of focus in Navy public works operations across the globe: leading Seabees in combat, contingency or humanitarian relief construction and construction contract management.

My career has been a blend of all three. I commanded a Seabee battalion in Little Creek, Virginia, and I am currently at Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFAC) Mid-Atlantic in Norfolk, Virginia, where we manage a \$3 billion annual construction budget. To go from what Kate said, there is a lot more to engineering than math or a bunch of people sitting around whiteboards problem solving, and that is why I love it!

***Is there a specific scenario, moment or project that made it come together for you?***

**Kate:** Coming out of the Coast Guard Academy, everybody is assigned to a ship for sea duty for two years. I was anxious about what this experience was going to be like, but it turned out to be a wonderful first tour. My Commanding Officer, Frank Reed, and both Executive Officers, Tim Cook and Tom Crabbs, were amazing leaders who set me up for success. I was one of the first two women ever assigned to the ship and under a lot of scrutiny. They made it clear to me and everyone else, they were confident in my abilities to drive the ship, navigate and lead a boarding team. It was very empowering. About eight months in, I qualified as Officer of the Deck and stood watch by myself in

the middle of the night when a "go-fast," a small cigarette boat, loaded with cocaine was coming across the Caribbean. We spotted it, and I launched the "Go-Fast Bill," directed the helicopter, and interdicted the bad guys. After that, I knew I wanted to do more. To be able to execute all of that as a competent part of the team was phenomenal.

Almost a decade later, I was the beneficiary of that same kind of empowering leadership style. After graduating school, I was assigned as the sole Coast Guard Officer in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Congressional Affairs Staff. A few months in, I was presented with this unique opportunity to serve as the Acting Chief of Staff. I was a very junior Lieutenant Commander, and the Chief of Staff job is filled by a senior GS-15. Before jumping on this chance, I decided to do a reality check with Coast Guard Congressional Affairs Commander Brian Penoyer and in then-Rear Admiral Karl Schultz. I was concerned that I might not be experienced enough, but they both said to step up and take that opportunity. Having support from leaders like RADM Penoyer and Admiral Schultz, who gave me the latitude to take on what could have been high risk assignment is very empowering. It was one of the most dramatic learning experiences of my entire Coast Guard career. I got to work directly for the Assistant Secretary on big issues like cybersecurity and Superstorm Sandy, I gained perspective on how technical information, whether it was about flood zones or cyber security, had to rapidly be taken onboard and translated and that accuracy was critical to making sound public policy. My engineering background was a critical foundation for making those quick assessments.

**Liz:** A CEC career blends operational deployment with shore installation management assignments. I was a Lieutenant and the officer-in-charge of a team of 20 Seabees drilling wells in a remote area of Africa. It was a lot of responsibility for a junior person. From there, I knew I loved this organization and they valued me for what I brought to the team. The Navy has continued to afford me amazing opportunities and challenges.

Kate and I both have been challenged above our pay grade at times. In each case, somebody saw capability within us and gave us an opportunity to give it our all. Many of our successes were the result of people giving us opportunities to succeed.

From a career perspective, having different jobs where I was both behind the scenes and in leadership positions, has taught me so much. As a Junior Officer behind the scene, I saw was able to observe senior leadership firsthand, how they think, their decision-making process, and how the implementation process plays out. It is so important to put yourself out there. The experience taught me to apply the same analytical

rigor then as I now do today in a senior leadership role. Also, having worked for Admirals when they were Commanders, to see them succeed, the way they rose in the ranks, was educational and informative.

*How do military organizations, whether the Coast Guard or the Navy, foster a culture that allows women to thrive?*

**Liz:** Be more inclusive and diverse. Do not ask how to attract more women into the service, ask instead, how to attract more young professionals coming out of school. Provide young professionals the space to be innovative in their processes and solutions. If young hires feel they have the autonomy and independence to solve problems and make decisions, they will stay. That is not specific to women in engineering, but a generational mindset change.

**Kate:** Compete based on values. The Coast Guard and the Navy are not able to compete for engineering talent with companies based solely on dollars. We successfully compete by highlighting how military service provides meaning, purpose, and experience. The constraints we put on ourselves is often cultural. When we talk specifically about retaining women, I think we, particularly as leaders in a male-dominated field, should think carefully about what we value and how we communicate those values. My observation in the Coast Guard is that women tend to thrive in communities where the standards are high but clear and fair, like the STEM-heavy marine safety community. Engineering is great because it is such a competency focused community so that when you are competent, people will know quickly. It is on us as leaders to make sure people are evaluated and rewarded based on what matters.



**Liz Durika (white hard hat) deployed with the Seabees**

**Liz:** Providing a greater sense of purpose builds a strong community. That makes it relevant to the junior engineers coming into the field. Right now, for example, I am working in a construction office. The engineers are with their pencils, down in the book, maybe doing geotechnical analysis for a dry dock, without necessarily understanding the implications of the work affecting the availability of a huge aircraft carrier that is supposed to be out to sea in a couple months. We need to make the work relevant and show correlation in how engineering supports the operational mission further down the line.

Having a greater sense of purpose is exactly what motivated both of us. I was on a ROTC scholarship, and Kate went to the Coast Guard Academy. The value of a greater purpose was instilled in us very early on. There's something about serving, that is bigger than you or me. I really enjoy serving my country. Understanding that greater purpose brings joy to work, and ultimately yields better results.

## **Inspiring the Next Generation, Bringing a Unique Perspective**

*What advice do you give as role models?*

**Kate:** Wow. It is always interesting to be described as a role model! I had not thought of myself as a role model, particularly for young women, until I went back to the Coast Guard Academy to teach a class on Arctic policy. There were many young women there who made it clear that they were looking at us as role models. I came away thinking, "I guess you're a female role model whether you want to be one or not. It's time to take that responsibility seriously." The best advice we gave was, focus on becoming very competent and good at your job early on. The military and engineering community rewards folks who quickly establish competency and deep credibility. There's a lot more flexibility now than there used to be, but fundamentally, everything that you do builds on your last experience. Be bold, take risks and go for the hard jobs early. Build a foundation of excellence at the start and you will be rewarded down the road.





## Sister Advice

*Empowering women to thrive while  
Inspiring the next generation to serve:*

- \* Be more inclusive and diverse
- \* Compete based on values
- \* Be competent and credible at your job
- \* Provide a greater sense of purpose
- \* Be calm and trust in your abilities

**Liz:** I will add to be calm and trust in your abilities. If you want to talk specifically about female mentorship, do not be cocky, be confident. Sometimes, that is where junior women fall behind. They don't speak up or volunteer for the hard jobs even when they are more than qualified to do them. Build that early credibility by being the best at your job and then be confident. Do not be afraid to put yourself out there for those challenging jobs.

*What other inspirational words do you share with young women to encourage them to speak up and take challenges?*

**Liz:** Whether you are male or female, what counts is your ability to get the job done. When you walk out of school with your engineering degree it shows that you are willing to work hard. If you have taken your Engineer in Training (EIT) test or earned your Professional Engineer (PE) license, you have the credentials, you can do this! If you lack in leadership or confidence, recognize your weaknesses and find ways to close that gap.

**Kate:** So true. You must find the right balance between confidence and cockiness. Be confident in your abilities because you have worked hard, but there is nothing wrong with pairing that confidence with a little bit of humility. Own your confidence but be honest about what you do not know. Some of the saltiest men I worked with felt fine about not knowing something and asking for help; it was never seen as weakness. It was the folks who tried to bluster their way through that created problems down the road.

*Was there an instance in your career where you were able to influence a positive change because you are a woman?*

**Kate:** There were some operational experiences, particularly with law enforcement or disaster response, where my perspective was different. As a woman, it's not uncommon to put yourself into the shoes of the person you are rescuing or with whom you are working. As an example, last year during the 37-day partial government shutdown, the Coast Guard, active duty workers and civilians were not getting paid. Civilian personnel were not permitted to come to work, while active duty members were designated as essential and required to. The Coast Guard child development centers across the country were closed because they were run by civilian personnel. This was a time I needed to speak up and say, "It's not right that you're asking young officers and enlisted to report as essential personnel, but not keep child care facilities open to support our Coast Guard parents." In the past, am sure more than one person raised this point, but eventually, the daycares supporting the Coast Guard were designated as essential facilities. While I would like to think that any leader would have taken this action, I do think that I was more attuned to this issue because I am a working mom with small children myself. Also, as one of the most senior (aka older) moms, I felt like I had to give our more junior members a voice.

**Liz:** There are times when a woman speaks up in a meeting, shares a good idea, and it is dismissed. Then, ten minutes later when a man suggests the same thought, suddenly it is a brilliant idea. If you are a leader in the room, it is your job to listen for good ideas, regardless of the source, and encourage them early on. Never assume that what your young, junior, woman is saying lacks value and dismiss it.

**Kate:** The first person who speaks up with a different perspective or thought in a group is taking a risk by putting themselves out there, they feel vulnerable. But once they take that chance and see the flood of ideas their comment generated, it's empowering. That first person to present a different perspective ignites the creativity that leads the team to a better solution.

*Kate, you were a White House Fellow, what lessons or advice can you share from that experience?*

**Kate:** As a White House Fellow, you are placed with a Cabinet-level secretary or inside the White House. I was fortunate enough to be placed as the deputy director of a program called Joining Forces. It was housed in First Lady Michelle Obama's office, but we partnered with the National Economic Council and the Council on Women and Girls in the West Wing. It was

an amazing opportunity to build partnerships and advocate for veterans and military spouses at a time when their value was not necessarily appreciated. When the program started, the unemployment rate for young veterans was almost triple that of civilians. Our goal was to find meaningful education, employment opportunities or entrepreneurship opportunities for veterans and military spouses.

During my interview, they essentially said told me that the responsibility of the person filling the position was to find jobs for 500,000 veterans and to drive down veteran homelessness, but you have no budget and you have no staff. All you have is the convening power of the White House. I joked that this must be a job for the Coast Guard, because we do all our interagency work with no budget and little straight-line authority. Over the course of my time there, we worked with nearly every department in the federal government, the team at Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families and a broad cross section of the tech industry. One of our biggest jobs was to translate all the skills military veterans bring to the table in a way that related to civilian opportunities.

A veterans' STEM experience is super valuable, but their 'soft skills' for managing risk, giving and accepting feedback and establishing a safety culture turned out to be the skills that were most undervalued. One employer called them the 'power skills.' I was able to advocate for that community and to ultimately line up 200,000 meaningful jobs for veterans and supporting initiatives for aspiring entrepreneurs before leaving. As a mentor, my message to all the engineers out there: apply for these kinds of fellowships, not many engineers do. There is a thirst for your engineering perspective from people in government.

***It is obvious you are both passionate about work and family, how do you achieve a work-life balance?***

**Liz:** Having honest and frank conversations with a great spouse makes it a lot easier. My husband Nathan is my biggest cheerleader and has always been very supportive. He's also a Commander in the Navy with a very demanding job. We make it work. We share many of the responsibilities of raising our family. There's no single answer to solve work-life balance. It



**Liz and Kate with their husbands, Nathan and Zack, as Lieutenants in Hawaii.**

is not the same at every point in your life. You need to find what works best for you and your family. The service needs to provide the service member with varied options, no one size fits all approach will be successful.

**Kate:** As usual, Liz is completely correct. I struggle with this myself, but as you get more senior, you need to have the confidence to say no to a project when you need to. If you have established a good professional reputation, you often find that the demand for your time exceeds the supply! For young people, especially women, I would say that you should remember building up professional capital early on gives you more flexibility later in your career. I have had female college seniors ask about STEM careers that are family friendly. What I say is that everyone should take a job that is challenging and interesting and that you find exciting now. Do not rule out options now just because in ten years you think they might not be the right fit. It's our job as leaders to model excellence and high performance, but also balance. It is okay to show people that we are human beings with families.

Liz and Kate are the quintessential sea service sisters. They truly bring it all together, making a positive impact at home, at the office and across the globe. Their special mix of humility, family values, curiosity and solid STEM foundation provides inspiration to all. [NEJ](#)