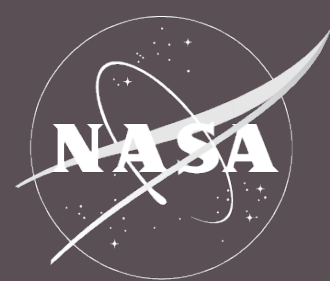


STENNIS SPACE CENTER

Profiles in Leadership



Deborah Norton never imagined herself working for NASA. Growing up, she saw the agency as a place for scientists, engineers, and astronauts, not people interested in business. That changed during her senior year in college when a man approached her for directions to a campus building. Norton was headed to the same building and shared “small talk” as the two walked in that direction. Upon arrival, the man, whom she later found out was the head of Career Planning and Placement, asked Norton if she might be interested in a student position at Stennis Space Center. Two months later, Norton began work as a student intern in the Stennis Office of the Chief Financial Officer. She joined the NASA team full-time in 1999 and served in various roles, including as business manager for multiple rocket engine test projects and deputy chief financial officer for resources management. In 2020, the Biloxi, Mississippi, native and now resident assumed her current role as Stennis Chief Financial Officer, leading the very team she joined as a student years earlier.

What were your early career plans?

Early on, I wanted to design clothes as I got the opportunity to do runway work with a major department store locally and in Houston. I learned that going to college is about figuring life out, and when I was in my first accounting class, my professor said, “Accounting is the language of money.” That is the day I became fascinated with accounting – what better language in which to be proficient!

What advice can you offer for having a good life-work balance?

Be flexible. Understanding the value of both the individual and work is important. Life focuses on the needs of the individual, while work emphasizes the importance of the group. If you understand the focus of work and the

intent of policies, you can use that knowledge to incorporate individual needs into that work. Work is something you do and not who you are, so as a working mom, it is important for me to prioritize key life events while doing that very same thing at work.

How do you define leadership?

A leader is nothing without the team of people she leads. A leader enables a team by setting expectations, providing accountability, and creating opportunities for each team member to succeed. A leader recognizes that each team member is different and uses these strengths to succeed, while helping to mitigate the weaknesses. A leader provides vision and strategy, the hope of the organization for an exciting future. A leader is self-aware with core values that continues to grow through experiences.

What is an important lesson you learned during your NASA career?

Participate in opportunities that present themselves no matter how frightening they seem, as they will lead to even better opportunities. Also, I have learned throughout my career that it is valuable (and alright) to be different. It is a funny joke in our organization that I am always the one person who is different when we do leadership personality, behavior, or character tests. In a recent team building event, the instructor called me a unicorn because of my rare skillset.

How would you characterize the Stennis workforce and work culture?

It is special. I never would have imagined that I would work for the same company for 20-plus years, but here I am because of the Stennis workforce and work culture. The workforce is made up all types of folks, including custodians, teachers, bankers, scientists, and engineers – some of the most intelligent people I have ever met – and yet, the work culture brings all of these differences together in harmony. We truly are the Stennis family.



Deborah Norton
Chief Financial Officer

What are you proudest of regarding your work with NASA and Stennis?

That is tough because I have gotten to do a lot of great things, but one of the things I am proud of is that I shared my work with my kids over the years. I had the opportunity to attend many of the space shuttle launches and took my kids to experience it every time. They both have an appreciation for engineering and science, and they have the imagination to believe that things are possible as a direct result. I remember a conversation among my son and his friends. They were discussing a project or topic, and he said, “Anything is possible; I saw a large, heavy rocket fly into the sky.” Passing on the firsthand knowledge of the amazing things NASA and Stennis does makes me proud.

What will you look back on most fondly about your NASA career?

What I will remember most about my work with NASA are the people I have had the chance to meet throughout the nation and the fact that I was part of something to better humanity, exploring what could be and not just accepting what is.