

Jemma Leeson

Refrigeration Apprentice (4th Year)



Jemma Leeson grew up 300 kilometres west of Wagga Wagga in remote New South Wales – a place where pathways into trades, especially for women, were limited. But even then, she knew she wanted to work in a mechanical or electrical field. The opportunity just wasn't there yet.

At 27, she moved to Perth and made a decision: it was time to invest in herself. She gave herself three months to secure an apprenticeship – or head home. Refrigeration wasn't the original plan, but it was the opportunity that stuck.

Now a fourth-year Refrigeration Apprentice working across central plant systems, Jemma is part of a small minority of women in the trade. She's seen how quickly women can be discouraged without support – and how powerful it is when that support exists. For her, success comes down to one thing: give it a shot, stick with it and back yourself.

1. This year's IWD theme is "Give to Gain". What does this mean to you?

To me, it's about sharing knowledge and backing others without expecting anything in return.

I've seen women leave the trade because they didn't have support – or even basic facilities on site.

That's why visibility and mentorship matter.

Sometimes all it takes is someone saying, "Try it. You've got everything to gain."

2. Can you share a moment in your career that really shaped who you are today?

I don't have one big turning point, but I've been lucky to work with tradies who gave me freedom early on – with support behind me.

They let me take control of jobs, run maintenance tasks and make decisions, while still being there if I needed guidance.

That balance built my confidence. Especially now, coming to the end of my apprenticeship, having "freedom with support" has shown me that I'm capable of doing the work on my own.

It's made the transition toward becoming a qualified technician feel achievable, not overwhelming.

3. What's something you've had to learn to back yourself on over time?

Confidence. The knowledge is all there – I know what I'm doing – but backing myself in the moment has been the biggest challenge.

Working in a male-dominated environment, especially as a mature-age apprentice, you can second-guess yourself.

Over time, I've realised it's about getting out there and doing it anyway. The confidence builds with experience.

It's not about knowing everything. It's about trusting that you do know enough – and that you'll keep learning.

5. Do you have a favourite quote or saying that inspires you or reflects how you approach work or life?

One piece of advice from my first tradie has stuck with me: "Put the blinkers on and focus on the task at hand."

To me, that means blocking out the noise - the distractions, the doubts, the outside opinions – and concentrating on what's in front of you.

It's simple: stay focused, do the work and get the job done.

4. What's one change you'd love to see in our industry over the next few years?

I'd love to see more women entering the trades – and staying. At TAFE, I saw maybe six women across the board, and several didn't make it through their second year. The numbers are still incredibly low, especially in places like Perth.

Support makes a huge difference. Even something as basic as proper facilities on site matters. I've been lucky to have strong support around me, and that's made all the difference.

I also think visibility is powerful – we're seeing growth in women's sport and more female role models online, and the same needs to happen in trades. The more women you see doing it, the more normal it becomes.

6. If you could give your younger self – or a young woman starting out – one piece of advice, what would it be?

Stick with it. Keep turning up and put your whole heart into it.

“ Put the blinkers on and focus on the task at hand

Getting To Know Gemma



What's your favourite movie?
10 Things I Hate About You



What's your favourite cuisine?
Classic Aussie pub food - parmy



What's your Go-to karaoke song?
"Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" – Shania Twain



You're on a desert island – what's the one thing you're bringing or having?
Tequila



What's something people would be surprised to know about you?
She plays rugby union for Perth Irish.