

MARIANA LEVER ASSP Greater Chicago Chapter President

Mariana Lever, President of ASSP's Greater Chicago Chapter, speaks about the importance of being a safety professional, volunteering opportunities at the Society and inclusivity in the safety profession.

Mariana Lever
Mariana Lever was born and raised in Mexico City, Mexico. She is a safety and health and environmental supervisor at Unilever with more than 5 years' experience in the food manufacturing industry. Lever holds an M.S. in Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences from University of Illinois at Chicago and a B.S. in Industrial Engineering from Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Estado de México. Lever is President of ASSP's Greater Chicago Chapter and a member of the Society's Women in Safety Excellence, Hispanic Safety Professionals and Young Professionals in OSH common interest groups. She is also a member of ASSP's Manufacturing Practice Specialty.

PSJ: You recently gave a presentation to students at University of Illinois at Chicago. What was the topic and how was it received by students?

Mariana: I spoke to students about my background and experiences as a safety professional working in the food industry for more than 5 years and how I moved from Mexico City to the U.S. after finishing my undergraduate degree. I discussed how safety professionals always have to be on call and available whenever the job requires. We, as safety professionals, are very important. We have an impact on the workers we are charged with protecting. At the end of the day, if you fix something and know it will be safe for your workers, you can go home and sleep soundly knowing they are protected. Overall, I received good feedback from the students about the presentation and I believe my message was well received.

PSJ: How did you get started in safety and what made you choose this profession?

Mariana: Safety and health in the workplace caught my attention during college, when I was majoring in Industrial and Systems Engineering in Mexico City. The professor would provide the class with real case studies and one of them struck me. It was the case of a child who was exposed to radiation through a piece of metal he found on the ground near his home. He thought the tingling sensation he felt when putting it in his mouth was fun and kept the piece of metal in his pocket. The child shared this new "toy" with his friends. Not long after, the child and his friends started showing signs of burns. The child who found the piece of metal lost most of his extremities and his tongue. It was later determined that the source of the burns was the radiated piece of metal he had found. This tragedy was a consequence of not having appropriate procedures in place to dispose of hazardous materials. It was then that I decided to pursue a career in safety.

PSJ: What do you think can be done to include people from minority groups, such as women and Hispanics, in the safety profession?

Mariana: I believe that outreach programs can help bring more people into this field. A lot of industries are in great need of diversity, such as bilingual safety professionals. Speaking the same language and knowing the culture is so important because it allows you to connect with people on a different level. Getting this message out to these groups and explaining the impact this profession has in the workplace can help attract more individuals who are passionate about safety.

PSJ: What advice would you give to people from these minority groups who are interested in pursuing a career in safety?

Mariana: I would encourage them to do an internship or get a mentor who can help guide them. Being able to understand the culture and provide support for employees is one of the most rewarding experiences. Take advantage of the activities that ASSP has to offer. To give you an example, I attended ASSP's Future Safety Leaders Conference the year before graduating from the master's program at University of Illinois at Chicago. I had the opportunity to network with other safety professionals and get my foot in the door with the Society. The following year I was invited to lead a roundtable discussion about my experience working in the manufacturing industry. For the past 3 years, I have continued leading this discussion. Speaking with students and providing them with insight on the work that goes into being a safety professional has been very rewarding.

PSJ: You recently became President of ASSP's Greater Chicago Chapter. Why did you get involved in local chapter volunteer positions and how do you think it has impacted your career?

Mariana: I got involved with the Greater Chicago Chapter about 7 years ago and have held different positions. Being part of the chapter has been a fundamental pillar in my career. I have the opportunity to connect with safety professionals from other fields, which helps me bring a different perspective to my job and gives me ideas on how to improve safety in the workplace.

We have been making a lot of changes in the way we lead the chapter and have seen an increase in participation from members. Last year, we started organizing social events for the chapter members. We are achieving two goals with these events: attracting our current members and getting exposure for the chapter. If our members start coming to the meetings regularly, they may start bringing their peers along when they see the benefit of networking with safety professionals in different fields. The goal is to continue bringing in new members and give back to the safety community.

For the past couple of years, we have had young professionals and recent graduates hold positions on the board. This has brought new ideas to the table and increased participation from the student section. We started organizing social events and held meetings during different times and locations to accommodate the needs of our members. These changes have proven to be a successful way to get members more involved in the chapter.

It is important for me to mention that we could not have a successful chapter without the support of our more veteran members. They are very dedicated to the chapter, always willing to help and share their knowledge. **PSJ**