

The right wiring for the job

By Megan Anderson

Heather Sommers says you have to have the right attitude to work at Sovereign Circuits in North Jackson. You need to care about what you do and care about your customers.

The room is large and hot, and the air is filled with the roar of two long machines. An unfamiliar chemical odor lingers in the air, enhanced by the room's warmth. The floor is painted dark blue, and yellow lights cast a strange glow over the woman standing by one of the machines. She wears a light blue work coat with the sleeves rolled up and the name "Heather" stitched across the front.

"You're really supposed to wear ear plugs in here," Heather Sommers, 36, says, speaking loudly to be heard over the noise of the machines. "I'm just used to it."

In this room within Sovereign Circuits in North Jackson, Sommers is doing her part to help the company manufacture printed circuit boards.



To some, her curly, shoulder-length, dark blonde hair and bright blue eyes framed with black mascara may seem out of place in this factory setting, but the way she confidently moves around the machine shows that she knows exactly what she's doing.

Sommers picks up a large yellow and copper-colored panel that she calls a core. She explains that a core is part of a printed circuit board. When a circuit board is put together, the core helps create electrical conduction pathways.

As she carefully places the core on the moving conveyor belt in front of her, she says that the large, noisy machine is called a Multi-Bond Line.

"The cores have to be cleaned, and this machine also adds an oxide coating to them," she says, watching the core slowly disappear into the machine. "The oxide coating is like an adhesive, it helps the other layers stick to it."

Sommers places another core onto the conveyor belt, and then runs over to the other end of the machine, where a newly oxidized piece of core is just about to fall off of the belt and onto the floor. Where the board was once copper, it is now dark

brown. She picks it up and places it on a pile of other cores, and is careful to put a piece of paper between each one so they don't stick together.

She walks quickly back to the other end of the machine, ready to place more pieces of 18 by 24 inch core into the machine. Back and forth she goes, until the stack of circuit board parts in front of her have all been through the machine.

"I don't always work in here," she says. "The guy who usually does this is on vacation." Sommers is the Lead Operator in the Bonding Area, the section of the factory where the circuit boards are put together.

"Wherever we're busiest on a particular day, that's where I go," she says. "I like staying busy; the day goes faster, and I get bored and antsy with nothing to do." Some days she works in Bonding, where she actually puts the layers of a circuit board together. Other days, she works in Lay-up, and is responsible for putting the layers of the circuit boards in the correct order. Her job is always different, and that's precisely what she enjoys about it.

She also enjoys actually seeing the finished product. Sovereign Circuits manufactures circuit boards mainly for military, aerospace, and down-hole drilling use. Their circuit boards are used mostly for missiles, satellites communication, and drill bits, as well as some commercial products like cell phones.

"I'll see something somewhere, like on T.V., and think 'Oh! That's so neat! I helped build that!'" she says.

Today, it is her job to walk back and forth, putting cores in and taking cores out. The loud whining of the machines and the strange yellow lighting don't seem to bother her. She is focused on her task.

She makes it clear that in this job, it's important to stay focused. Everyone works together as a team to create each circuit board, and there is no tolerance for slackers.

"We have a 'whatever it takes' attitude'," she says. "Someone who is only here for the job doesn't have the right attitude. We actually care about each job, and making sure it's shipped to the customer on time. Anyone without that attitude brings the whole department down."

We had a guy work with us who was afraid to get his hands dirty," she laughs as she remembers. "He would say, 'My hands are too pretty to get dirty!' You can't be afraid to get dirty at this job."

Sommers isn't worried about getting dirty. She has worked for Sovereign Circuits for three years, at a job where the starting pay is \$9 per hour, and she couldn't imagine doing anything else.

"I wake up ready to go to work, not dreading it," she says. "I don't like the repetitiveness of a desk job," she continues. "I want to keep learning, but I don't necessarily want to go higher [in the company]. I wouldn't like running around, telling people what to do. I don't want to lose touch."

Sommers makes one last trip from the front of the machine to the back of the machine, and then she's finished with this batch of cores. She piles them onto a tray and carries it down a sterile white hallway to a room marked Lay-up Staging, where the different layers of a circuit board will be put together.

As she leaves the room, a co-worker joins Sommers in the hallway. Roseann Fuller has worked with Sommers for two and a half years. In fact, Fuller was trained by Sommers, and as the two stand in the hallway and joke around with each other, they show that they are friends as well as coworkers.

"She's why I stayed here," Fuller says of Sommers. "I was so nervous [when I started], and she was amazing. If I asked her the same question a hundred times, she answered patiently each time."

While Sommers enjoys the easy camaraderie with her co-workers, in a way, she also regrets that time spent with them. Every day she's at work is another day that she's unable to spend time with her family, and although she loves her job, she wishes she had more time for her family. She works six days a week, from 7:30 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., and sometimes she gets aggravated that so much of her time is spent working instead of spending time with her two daughters and her boyfriend.

"My first year here, I didn't have a life outside of work" she says. "Even now, there are a lot of days that I have to stay at work late, or come back in after I've already left."

Sommers lives in North Jackson with her boyfriend and her 15-year-old daughter. Her youngest daughter, age 10, lives in Pennsylvania with her father, Sommers's ex-husband. Sommers felt that living with her father was the best choice for her daughter, because Sommers wasn't home enough to give her daughter the attention she needed; however, she does get to see her daughter whenever she wants. She and her ex-husband share custody of their children, and because their divorce is amicable, there are no custody problems.

Before she got divorced, working at Sovereign Circuits was not the life Sommers had imagined for herself.

"I always wanted to work for the state police," she says of her past ambitions. She was able to follow her ambitions for a brief period when she joined the military. During her time in the Army, she worked with the canine unit of the military police. "I loved that," she says of her past life. But she couldn't continue with that life and raise her family the way she wanted to.

“I had a chance to go to Korea ,” she says. “But they wanted me to give up my daughter, and keep her with someone in the States.”
Sommers chose family over Korea , and when her time was up, she left the Army. She considered a career with the Pennsylvania State Police, but found that also interfered with her family.

“I couldn't be as free as I wanted with that job while also having kids,” she says. She ended up working two days a week at a staffing company, until she discovered Sovereign Circuits.

“It's not a normal job,” she says. “But I love it.”