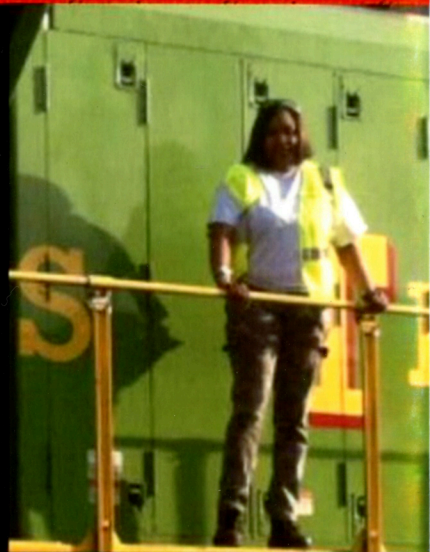


Bluefield State College

SARAH PONDER

Locomotive Engineer

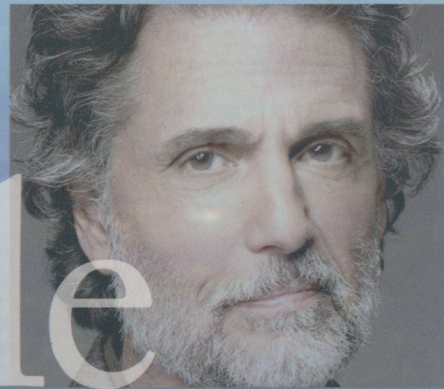
The first African American Conductor in the Norfolk Southern Pocahontas Division. Her success didn't stop there when she was promoted to become the first African American Locomotive Engineer.



CELEBRATING
BLACK HISTORY MONTH



WEST VIRGINIA:



Its people places stories



WEST VIRGINIA: Its people, places & stories

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS of WEST VIRGINIA: Its people, places & stories include:

Ed Rehbein	Jamie Null	Norm Haddad
Nicole Fields	Bill Archer	Samantha Perry
Lisa Shrewsberry	Melissa Cuppett	Audrey Stanton-Smith
Misty Poe	Bob Hertzel	Colleen S. Good
Dreama J. Morgan	Greg Jordan	Lucinda Martin
Mary Wade Burnside	Ed McCall	

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Sarah Ponder, an engineer, stands in front of a Norfolk Southern train in Bluefield.
(Photo by Eric DiNovo)

FULL STEAM AHEAD

A detailed illustration of a black steam locomotive with white smoke billowing from its smokestack and wheels, positioned in front of the word 'AHEAD'.

By Jamie Null

Sarah Ponder will never forget the look on the woman's face when the train rolled through a railroad crossing in Clinch Valley, Virginia.

One of the engineers for Norfolk Southern, Ponder said the woman looked straight at her, turned to her husband in the car and said, "That's a woman."

It was a moment Ponder has never forgotten for good reason. Only seconds before, the 49-year old Bluefield resident was considering quitting her job as a conductor. She changed her mind after seeing the admiration in the other woman's eyes.

"She looked right at me," Ponder said. "I have never ever forgot her and I decided I had to stay out here for women."



Trains going by in Bluefield, W.Va.

A graduate of Bluefield High School, she graduated from Bluefield State College in 1981 with a degree in business administration. She moved to Washington, D.C., and began working in the FBI building in the espionage department. She stayed there four years before returning back home to help take care of mother, who was experiencing health problems. A friend told her about a Norfolk Southern hiring session in McDowell County. At first, she didn't want to go, but the company was interested in hiring women and minorities. Ponder, an African-American female, didn't have any experience on the railroad, but she decided to attend the session, even with her reservations. Ponder said more than 750 people showed up at the hiring session in Welch in 1998.

of Norfolk Southern. However, she is the only African American woman engineer, perhaps the only one in local history.

She doesn't take her position, or her role in railroad history, lightly.

"It doesn't mean you can slack," she explained. "I am a good engineer. I have to be extra good because they are looking at me closer. I have to be on top of my game."

She said co-workers have always went out of their way to help her succeed.

Ponder transports coal, Ford Motor cars, U.S. mail and freight for the railroad. A train full of coal weighs 21,000 tons and freight weighs 6,000 tons. The train is typically 4,500-6,000 foot long and can hold 170 loads of coal and

**"Don't let anything deter you. You can achieve anything.
You can do your job if you put your mind to it."**

When she was hired, she couldn't believe it.

"I was just overwhelmed. It was exciting and scary," she added. "It was a male-dominated workforce."

She remembers being scared on her first day and slightly overwhelmed. "I wanted to understand the job and know the territory," she said.

And while Ponder was ready for her job, the facilities were not used to having a women in the workplace.

"They didn't have appropriate bathroom facilities on the train," she said. "We had to use a bucket. Now, they have made it better for women."

Ponder was a conductor for eight years before enrolling in engineering school in Georgia.

"That was one of the hardest tests in my life. There were five tests and a month of hard training. Then I came back and had to train for eight months with an engineer and learn about the mountains and the air and how to run the train," she said.

She said local engineers have a good knowledge of what it takes to drive a train in the mountains of West Virginia and Virginia.

"Out in places like California, it is flat and they don't have to operate on mountains," she said, laughing.

Her work takes her on routes through the Pocahontas Main Line, Clinch Valley, Weller and Portsmouth. And her days are never alike. Ponder, a single mom to three children, is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. She is on the extra list and her shift varies each day.

Ponder is not the only woman at the Pocahontas Division

50-60 loads of freight. There is no steering wheel, Ponder said, laughing.

She enjoys her job, especially the level of trust exchanged between Ponder and her employers.

"It is a good feeling to know I am in charge and they trust me. It is up to me to get the train from point A to B. It is a good feeling of power, too," she said.

It hasn't always been a smooth ride. Her youngest son, now in high school, was only 9 months old when she started working for the railroad. She relied on baby-sitters, friends and family. Sometimes even in the middle of the night. Then, came the fine line most working mothers face every day — the balance between work and home.

"It was tough," she said, looking back at those days.

"There was meals and laundry to do."

Ponder had two jobs, one at the railroad and one at home. Yet, she believes she has given her sons a good example to follow as they enter adulthood.

"None of their friends can say their moms do the same thing at work," she added, laughing.

Not only does she influence her sons, but she also knows she holds a position to help other women. She said women can do anything just as good.

"Don't let anything deter you. You can achieve anything. You can do your job if you put your mind to it."

Her advice? Don't mix work and home together. Leave work at the office or in her case, railroad. And don't bring home to the job. Her job requires full attention, she said. But in a split-second, she sees the look of people's faces — a look of wonder and astonishment and she keeps moving forward.



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