Michelle I. Redish

On doing what it takes to reach her goals: “I challenged myself. I said, ‘I’m going to be the top of my class.’ That was my goal, my focus: not only to learn what’s necessary, but to be the best at it.”

–Michelle I. Redish, July 21, 2009

Michelle I. Redish is pretty unique. She’s a laser technician who happens to be female. But this is by no means her only distinction in the photonics industry. She’s a proud employee of Northrop Grumman Corporation and plays a major part in homeland security.

Women make up only 14 percent of the nation’s photonics technicians.* So, if there are so few, how did Michelle end up studying photonics? It was a family connection. “I went to a four-year university, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do,” she recalls. “I spent two years switching around from chemistry to psychology to accounting. I came home for spring break and saw that my mom, who is now also a laser technician, had signed up at Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) and was taking laser and photonics courses. She told me a little about lasers and photonics and set up a tour with Mr. Gary Beasley. I saw some of the applications for which a laser can be used, and I was hooked. I wanted to do that. It was like that little light bulb going off. The same day, I transferred from the university to CCCC.”

At first, classes were a little awkward, but not because Michelle was the only woman there. “The classmates didn’t each other, so they were very quiet in class,” she says. “They didn’t know we could talk to one another. But as the year went on, we realized that if we wanted to make it through, and most did, we had to work together. Teamwork is a major factor.” And Michelle was determined to do everything she must to succeed. She challenged herself to be at the top of her class. Her goal was not just to learn what was necessary but to be the best at it. Michelle achieved her goal and, as a result, was able to get exactly the job she wanted.

Michelle describes her work this way: “I build the lasers that are a part of the protective defense of airplanes for soldiers going to Iraq and Afghanistan. I can’t tell you exactly what it does, for security reasons, but the laser redirects any oncoming missiles.” Having recently been promoted from laser technician I to laser technician II, Michelle also works on a program for land forces, creating thermal-view range finders. “It is a measuring device for both short and long distances,” she explains. “A soldier can look through the range finder and tell his commanding officer, ‘We see an enemy at this location, this many feet away.’”

Michelle’s future is bright, and full of photonics and optics. “I’m planning to go back to school to get a bachelor’s degree in either optical engineering or chemical engineering,” she says. “There are certain coatings that go on optics components. I’d like to be a part of devising new and better ways to make those coatings.” No doubt Michelle’s focus and passion for photonics will take her exactly where she wants to go.

Michelle I. Redish earned an associate in applied science degree in lasers and photonics technology and a certificate in electronics engineering technology in 2006 from Central Carolina Community College in Lillington, North Carolina. She lives in Sorrento, Florida, goes to the beach every weekend, and regularly sings at Disney World with her music group Sing Live USA.