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Waterside worker's break with tradition

IN a small Italian village on the island of Sardinia, a young Alessandra Daley learnt about determination and having the courage to meet challenges.

Those qualities proved priceless when at 21 she became a trainee with South Australia's then Marine and Harbours Agency.

Now 30, she has climbed through the ranks of human resources at what has since become Flinders Ports and challenged traditional practices in the male-dominated maritime industry.

Mrs Daley is one of only 12 women among the company's 200 or so full-time and casual staff.

She is the only female manager and, after much effort, has won over the male dock workers.

``Initially, it was this young chick coming in and (they'd say) `we've been doing this for 20 years, what do you know?'," Mrs Daley says.

``It took a while to earn their trust and to be in a position where I could actually assist them.

``Now I'm in a position with the guys where we have a rapport."

Her efforts at Flinders Ports won her South Australia's 2003 Telstra Young Business Woman of the Year award last month.

``I was surprised just to be a finalist," she says.

She arrived in Australia - the first time - as a toddler.

``We came to Australia in the 1970s when immigration was open and the Australian government was looking for qualified tradespeople," Mrs Daley says.

``My parents were only young, with three little kids, and they were basically fully funded by the government to come over because my dad (Enrico Manca) is a builder.

``They saw it as a great opportunity for us kids."

However, after nine years in Australia, the family returned to Italy - throwing a 12-year-old Alessandra into a new community where she knew no one and could not speak the language.

``That made me very determined because I always felt, regardless of the challenges we had moving halfway across the world, it just made me more and more determined to succeed," she says.

``The first week (at school) I was told I was hopeless because I didn't speak the language. But because that teacher challenged me in that way, within three months I had learnt the language, passed the year with excellent results and pretty much proved to him that I wasn't some ignorant girl.

``Those challenges made me determined and I always wanted to prove `I can do this'. I think that's always stayed with me."

Australia drew the family back to Adelaide in 1990.

``My parents just missed the way of life and how peaceful and easy it is to live in Australia," Mrs Daley says. ``Italy is a country the size of SA with 60 million people in it."

Four years after the family's return and with little knowledge of the maritime industry, Mrs Daley won a traineeship with the then Marine and Harbours Agency.

The next year she became an assistant human resources consultant at the agency, a human resources officer in 2001 and is now the manager of human resources and management systems.

Responsibilities include everything from hiring and training to occupational health and safety.

Mrs Daley recently computerised the dock workers' time sheets and introduced a data base for maintenance and repairs.

``I developed the programs . . . everything through to training 20 guys who had never turned on a computer before," she says.

``Their initial reaction was `we're here to tie up ships, not work on computers'. They didn't see the benefit but now they . . . feel more empowered, they have this skill.

``My role in this company is to lead and encourage people and develop them . . . to what they can really achieve."

Mrs Daley earlier had dreamt of becoming a teacher and it was only by chance that her traineeship took her into human resources.

``It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I realised this is what I wanted to do," she says. ``There's lots of contact with people and a lot of variety."

As well, there are similarities with the teacher role she once hoped for, as she runs and organises Flinders Ports' training.

``I used to love teaching other people how to do things," she says. ``In a way, I fell back into that and I do a lot of that here.

``The most rewarding part of my job is being responsible for developing people to their full potential."

As far as her own potential, she plans to do a business management degree through the University of Queensland next year and has her sights set on being a Flinders Ports executive in five years.

Mrs Daley will join other state and territory winners in Melbourne on October 25 for the announcement of the national young business woman of the year.