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All in the family

Trucks are in the blood of the Simmons family of Leicester, including third-generation Jess Simmons, an apprentice at Midlands Renault dealer RH Commercial Vehicles (RHCV) in Leicester. Interview by Will Dalrymple

Simmons grew up around trucks. Her father, a truck driver, for a time operated his own company, John Simmons Haulage, which followed in the footsteps of his own father’s firm, John C Simmons Haulage. “If I had been a boy, I would have been called John,” jokes Jess.

So she was exposed to commercial vehicles at an early age, and, handy with tools, she developed an interest in how the vehicles worked and operated. Having witnessed first-hand the stresses and strains of driving, she focused instead on maintenance. That originally manifested in a desire to work on construction plant and machinery, but a week’s work placement at Mercedes-Benz dealer Mertrux, organised by a careers fair at her school, changed her mind.

“The industry is painted as male dominated, and it is, but if I hadn’t taken the chance and done a work placement, I don’t know if I would have proceeded with it. I love it, and I’m not changing careers now,” says Jess.

She nearly gave up working in the industry entirely after facing some opposition in her early career. However, she was determined to not be beaten. Moving to RHCV has given her the confidence to continue in this field.

“I love it here because no one judges you, what gender you are, you don’t get any judgement here; everyone’s always friendly and willing to help out.”

Now, Simmons is in the third year



of what should have been a three-year Level 3 heavy goods vehicle service maintenance technician qualification. But COVID-related delays, and Renault’s switch to training provider Remit, have extended the duration of the training.

Day-to-day work includes shadowing other technicians and carrying out inspections, servicing brakes and performing diagnostics. “Whatever the fault, I attempt it myself, and if I haven’t got the training, I ask for help,” Simmons says, adding that there’s no shame in that. She lists as challenges the time pressure on repairs, and the increasing extent of electrics in HGVs.

In addition to honing her skills on commercial vehicles in the garage,

the young apprentice is also training for the driver’s seat in her free time. Having recently passed theory tests, she is currently awaiting a Class 1 practical date.

Part of the benefit would be to be able to carry out road tests of repaired vehicles – although the workshop has a driver on call if needed. She admits her motivation goes beyond vocational need: “Having a licence has always been a dream. Although I don’t see myself not being a mechanic, I’d like to have the option all the same.”

The only problem she faces now at work as a female technician is finding well-fitting PPE. “I haven’t got tiny feet, nor massive feet. But it’s impossible to find size five boots. So I take size six and double-sock. As the overalls here are made to measure, they do fit properly.”

Despite having faced a difficult experience, she encourages female candidates to consider engineering. She says: “Definitely give it a chance. There are companies that treat you the same, and where everything’s equal. The problem with this industry is there is a lot of sexism, and there are a lot of companies that will knock you down, but there are also amazing companies like RHCV that will offer you a chance and give you an opportunity. After my last job, I was willing to give it all up, but I got this [job], and it was the best decision I ever made.” **TE**