

# I Felt Like I Belonged There

BY DELIE WILKENS

I approached the Inaugural Women's First Congress in the same way I approach almost all professional working events: with muted anxiety and an internal mantra of "It'll be over in a few days."

It's not that I wasn't excited about this event; I was! For the better part of a year, I had been working to develop content for the Women's Forest Congress sessions, so I knew the quality of what would be presented. I was part of the WFC delegate group, working on the Leadership for Equity and Inclusion theme, so I knew that women of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals would be represented. I even helped to develop the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities' Innovation Lab, so I knew there would be engaging conversations, fun photos, and (most important) candy. What I did not know (and the genesis for my anxiety) was how the congress itself would be received by the hundreds of women attending or the multitude of employers they were representing.

What I found genuinely surprised me: these women were all there, representing their employers and talking about their work in forestry, but they were also taking ownership of who they were. As people, as women. Sure, I heard "Can you guess the tree species from this tree cookie?" or "What about a certification in urban

forestry?" or "This is how to appeal to a new generation of foresters." Yet I also heard a much louder voice in the collective room: women talking about themselves. They were talking about strong friendships, new babies, old pets, and fast cars. They were talking about being the only female in the sawmill, being the first woman CEO of their company, and being the first two women to canoe from Minneapolis to Hudson Bay. It was awe inspiring to hear so many stories of triumph and perseverance and vulnerability, and it was even more inspiring to see the response.

There was cheering, whooping, yelling, laughing, and—more than anything—supporting. I didn't witness any exclusive side conversations. No sly remarks, no undermining of a message. In fact, several people explicitly stated that type of movement would not work. It was not about the exclusion of anyone. We need the support of other women, of men, of anyone who believes in what we are doing. That is the only way to do this work well.

What began as an anxious feeling soon melted away into a calm elation, a steady hum of inspiration as I slipped in and out of breakout rooms, creativity rooms, and wellness rooms. Occasionally, I would have the familiar nagging feeling of "Should I take a few minutes to check my email?" but it was quickly followed by, "Goodness, I really



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don't want to miss Mia and Kathy talking about mentorship!"

You don't get very far into your career in forestry before someone reminds you that most of us are in forestry because we like . . . well, forests. The ones far away from people and airports and conferences. That is, of course, a generalization, but we tend not to be an overly extroverted bunch. Yet you wouldn't be able to tell that from this congress. People often tell me that you cannot tell an introvert from an extrovert if they are in the right environment, around the right people. It's almost as if this whole thing was organized not based on your standard template for conferences, but by really understanding the people who would be attending and what they needed to hear.

I don't think I'm alone in saying that I felt like I belonged there—not because I was convincing myself but because others were showing me that I did.

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*Delie Wilkens is a program analyst with the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities. This article was originally published on the Women's Forest Congress blog as "My Reflections on the Inaugural Women's Forest Congress" at [womensforestcongress.org/blog](https://womensforestcongress.org/blog).*