

INNOVATORS CHOOSE DELAWARE



Erica Nemser

CEO of Compact Membrane Systems, Inc., an advanced materials company in Newport.

Growing up, what did you want to do?

Nemser: I had no idea that I would be doing this. From a very young age, I liked school, ideas, problem solving, and variety. I try new things that are interesting, opportunities where I can jump in the deep end, learn a lot, and have substantial impact. I started as an economist, became a consultant working in healthcare and on the practice of consulting.

I have found amazing similarities in unexpected places. For example, between helping McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, pursue diversity goals and [helping] Compact Membrane Systems (CMS) develop a new customer base in petrochemicals. Who knew?

My path has been a journey of learning and growth. I am guided by questions: Where is a worthy problem? What can I learn? How am I uniquely positioned to solve it? Will I love working on it? What will I leave behind?

When you're not working, what do you enjoy doing in Delaware?

Nemser: I travel a lot and spend time with my family, so I use the Delaware Valley as a jumping off point for lots of cool things near and far. We recently went to Shenandoah National Park and Monticello, which I put in the "near." My kids are angling for an Alaska vacation, which would definitely be "far."

What makes you passionate about Delaware?

Nemser: The people are amazing—helpful, smart, inspiring, genuine, modest and real. When I came to this role, it was the first time I was back in Wilmington in decades and I didn't have a network in the chemical or industrial sectors. I am very grateful for the warm welcome I received and the ongoing support of the community. I never stop marveling at how much Delawareans love their state. Compared to other places, it's a significant contrast. I never feel that anyone is out to "win" the cocktail party or event. It's very refreshing.

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We are shining a light on the leaders who make our communities a better place to live, work and play.

My family connection to Delaware actually goes way back. My great grandfather came to Delaware in the 1930s as a chemist and a lawyer to work in DuPont's new patent division. Family legend claims that he worked directly with Wallace Carothers writing the original Nylon patent.

If you weren't doing the job you are doing, what would you be doing today?

Nemser: I would probably be doing something else that I think is ambitious and takes some gumption to try. I would be terrible at keeping trains running on time or making something 1.75 percent faster or better. I am pretty sure I would not be doing that.

What's your advice for others pursuing transformational career goals?

Nemser: Don't allow others to impose their limitations onto you. On taking the leap—sometimes, you just need to jump and have the confidence in yourself that you will land. People will tell you that you are committing career suicide. They are wrong. It will just take some patience and fortitude. In those moments, I remind myself that there are more exciting, fascinating and transformational things that one can do than will fit into one lifetime. So it's not worth wasting an extra second convincing yourself why second best will be OK. Worst case, in trying something new, you will learn and have a good story. And most career decisions are not one-way doors. Don't believe in the arrival fallacy—that an unsatisfying career choice will make you happy if you just reach the next level. It won't.

That said, do think about a multi-step path. You may want or need some form of apprenticeship or trial as a midway step to where you are going. And recognize that you may have to forgo valuable things in the near term—income, network, prestige, identity—in order to move into a new role. Be ready for that.