

# Keeping Oregon Moving in a Pandemic: Meet the Unstoppable Port Women Making History

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During Women’s History Month, **we’re choosing to challenge a history of writing women’s contributions out of history**. We’re excited to highlight the contributions of our own Port women throughout the month.

We’re kicking things off by highlighting some of the women who have been working on-site at PDX and our Marine terminals throughout the pandemic. We’ll follow with profiles of our emergency operations leaders and firefighters and paramedics.

As we spoke with Port employees Karen Soules, Salima McRae, Michelle Arrowsmith and Lois Jensen, they touched on a common theme in their path to their current career: a passion for their chosen field and their love for the sense of community at the Port and PDX.

Communication center dispatchers Michelle Arrowsmith and Karen Soules have worked in emergency services since their teen years and appreciate the smaller, more intimate environment of Port dispatch. “We get to focus more on customer service here and that sense of community service was what drew me in,” said Michelle.

Salima McRae, airport operation specialist, knew that Portland airport was the place she wanted to be – she’s worked various roles at PDX for most of her career before joining the Port team. Similarly, before becoming a parking control representative, Lois Jensen spent her teen years roaming SeaTac and nearly a decade working for airlines. “The jet fuel was in my blood!” she remarked.

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Karen Soules



Salima McRae

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Michelle Arrowsmith



Lois Jensen

## **You've been working on-site through this entire pandemic. What has this experience been like for you?**

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**Karen Soules:** 2020 was surreal. Very little about my day-to-day routine actually changed, except for the part where absolutely everything changed. I felt fortunate to still have a place to go every day and the normalcy that afforded; at the same time, I don't think it provided the breathing room to really process the facts of living through a global natural disaster. Walking through the deserted terminal every day on the way in was eerie.

**Salima McRae:** Like most people, I was scared that I might contract the virus and with my position I was even at a higher risk because of my regular contact with the traveling public. Although I was worried most of the time, I was grateful to have an organization that did not have to close down. Dealing with the public has its challenges and the pandemic added an additional layer of work that required me to be extra cautious. The pandemic is still a part of daily life, but I have become accustomed to the safety protocols implemented by the Port to keep everyone safe and healthy.



**Michelle Arrowsmith:** Honestly, it's been a bit isolating, even though I'm going into work every day. We are limiting our contact with each other and outside work groups. We wear masks the entire time we are at work and we only see people from other shifts for a couple of minutes at shift change or if they are working overtime. I miss seeing people from the other work groups in person as well as my team members.

**Lois Jensen:** At the beginning it was scary – the unknown factor especially – and it reminded me of the movie “The Langoliers” where everyone but a handful of people had just vanished from the airport terminals. I walked the roadway, terminal, and the garage with a mindset of being visible and helpful for any passengers who needed assistance or just a smiling, friendly face.

## **Was there a moment at work this last year that really warmed your heart or made you smile?**

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**Karen Soules:** I've been incredibly privileged to work with people who show up every day and ask: “How can I help?” It's inspiring and humbling.

**Salima McRae:** I had a Southwest crew member walk up to me and say thank you for making sure the airport is operating safely.

**Michelle Arrowsmith:** The Port's virtual employee town hall meetings have been a bright spot that has helped make it seem like we are more together as we navigate this pandemic. It has made our distanced workplace feel more like a community for those of us that don't work

that closely together on a normal basis. I also really enjoyed all the different videos that people have put together for us. There have been ones on cooking, culture, and storytelling about their lives. I am consistently amazed by the interesting and talented people who work at the Port!

**Lois Jensen:** I am thankful for each passenger that takes the time to stop and just say, “Thank you for what you do.” The moments that touch your heart stand out too. Recently we watched a couple in tears embracing so tightly, as though they would never see each other again. When the woman walked into the terminal the man ran right out of his shoes to follow! I handed the shoes to the young man and I told him to follow her. Follow her as far as you can before she boards that flight.

## **Leadership has many forms. What does leadership mean to you?**

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**Karen Soules:** Leadership is a topic that’s been on my mind a lot recently. I was promoted to my current position this fall and subsequently have spent a lot of time reflecting on the past leaders in my life and considering the traits they displayed. I think the ones who were most effective were those who personally modeled their expectations. You would think that formula is easy enough to embody – simply lead by example. But now that it is my turn to lead, and I daily consider what my group needs from me, I am confronted with a question that had not occurred to me: Am I modeling what is expected of me? Despite being promoted on merit, I cannot express the pressure I feel to now become someone else. Discerning which pressure I should resist, and which will lead to growth is a real challenge. It’s something I’m sitting with at the moment because I feel it’s important to get right.

**Michelle Arrowsmith:** To be a leader doesn’t mean you have to be the person in charge. It does mean that you are willing to step up when something needs done, even if that something is just to be a positive and engaged employee. A leader is someone who helps to create a culture of inclusion, value, trust, and positivity. We are all responsible for our own behavior and attitude, especially in the workplace. I have worked very hard to move away from a negative viewpoint of things in my life and find the positive aspects instead. It’s not always easy, but I can attest that it’s much more fulfilling to find opportunity for growth in things instead of just complaining about them.

**Salima McRae** Leadership for me is doing what you would expect from others and not just sitting on the sidelines. Leadership is capitalizing on the strength of the collective, while nurturing and developing areas that need work.

**Lois Jensen:** Leadership is to “walk that walk” even when nobody is there. Smile behind that mask! Be approachable. Offer help and never be afraid to ask for help yourself. Do the right thing because it’s the right thing to do. Buy the coffee for the person behind you once in a while. Make your bed in the morning (it’s a good way to start the day!).



Lois poses with Portland Trail Blazer Jusuf Nurkić

While all of these women spend their working hours as an essential part of PDX and the Port, as we learn about them at work, we also learn about them at home – Michelle is a mom of seven and a new grandmother, Salima has a past as a dancer, lucky Lois has won not just one, but three free trips, and Karen keeps busy with art and needlepoint. The unique perspectives they bring to their jobs are part of what makes the Port special and serves as a reflection of the women that shape the community and our history.





