

Long a go-to provider of drilling services in Canada and the United States, Vic Progressive Diamond Drilling is embarking on its first foray into West Africa, where it will be helping mining development companies explore for gold. Keith Regan learns from the company's president how attention to quality, safety and environment have helped Vic grow and stand out in a highly competitive market

Laura Araneda's grandfathers were miners. Her father was an underground driller in the mines of Canada's New Brunswick province and beyond before he decided to found his own diamond drilling company. Today, as president of Vic Progressive Diamond Drilling (VPDD), the firm her father founded in 1987, Araneda believes that by staying focused on doing things right, by drilling safely and with care for the environment, employees and host communities, VPDD will continue to gain customers and grow into new markets.

Based in Sussex, New Brunswick, Vic Progressive Diamond Drilling has operations across Canada, a location in Nevada in the US, and now a presence in West Africa, where it has won contracts to help explore for gold. The firm's approximately 100 employees, a number that will rise during the summer months, carry on a tradition of innovation and service to the mining industry as a whole.

"We've been in the business for 23 years now," Araneda says. "Mining is a relatively small community, and your reputation precedes you. That's got to be your number one priority. You need to make sure that when you commit to something you do it right and do it better than expectations."

VPDD began with a focus on underground drilling and still does an extensive amount of that work, but it has also expanded into surface drilling, where much of the energy is now being directed as mining firms and exploration interests look to find the next generation of producing mines to feed hungry markets. VPDD has also expanded into providing mine services, extending labor to mines as needed on a contract basis, and offers expertise in high-pressure and high-volume grouting to help address water infiltration and related situations.

Araneda believes that growth comes as a result of paying attention to the way the company does business on a daily basis. By performing with high standards for worker safety and environmental respect, the company naturally gains customers and market share. "Our main focus is safety and protecting the environment. Everything else flows from that. For our customers, it's not about safety versus production but safe production."

Ensuring that safe operation and a light footprint remain top of mind for all employees at all levels is achieved through regular meetings and constant two-way communication. "All our workers meet daily when possible on the job site. We have a stop-and-correct system in place for any issues or concerns that arise on the safety side; everybody is able to make known what they see or find, and we look for ways to make things a little better and safer. That information is then filtered back to the head office, and if there's action needed, we jump on it right away. If you want to keep and attract the best people, you've got to let them know that their personal safety is number one. Nothing is more important than them making it home at the end of the day."

Having minimal environmental impact has also been a longtime focus at VPDD. The company has embraced smaller, track-based diamond drilling machines that do less damage to the ground they are helping to explore, and it is constantly looking for ways to move to less environmentally hazardous oils and fluids. "We can be working in some pristine areas, and we want to leave them as we found them," says Araneda. The company has upgraded its fleet and invested in less hazardous approaches to its work. "It's a little more expensive up front, but compared to the cost of having even a single accident, it's definitely worth it."

Safety and environmental friendliness are often achieved through innovation, with workers devising new drill modifications or new techniques. "It comes back to everybody always talking about concepts for ways to do things better," Araneda says. "We have a great crew and they know we support their efforts to think out of the box. There are always new modifications and enhancements being tried and tested." Innovations that the company has been credited with include wireless overshot technology, unitized drilling equipment and back-reaming—advances that heighten employee safety and boost productivity at the same time.

Together, safety and the environment are part of a larger philosophy of community involvement. VPDD pledges to hire as many people as possible from the local communities where it does its drilling as it moves



around Canada. The company also makes investments in community groups, supporting youth sports, local charities and other initiatives. "We've found that if you bring the community in with you, they'll buy into the whole of what you're doing."

Looking ahead, Araneda is excited about the opportunities the firm sees, as both Canadian and US mine concerns continue to drill underground in existing mines and explore new opportunities and as VPDD

moves into new overseas markets. "With gold prices being where they are, there's a lot of development happening in West Africa, and as we get over there with our crews, hopefully it will be a great opportunity for us for years to come," Araneda says. Future opportunities may lie in locations such as Australia and Asia, she adds. "We have the expertise and the crews, and we'll go wherever the work takes us." www.progressivedrilling.com