

# PROMOTING DIVERSITY



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# PestWorld talks to several diverse industry professionals about their career journey.

BY SANDY SMITH

**HAMILTON ALLEN FORMED AN INTEREST IN PEST** management when helping an uncle combat a fire ant problem. Jessica Roe brought expertise from a key client group: health-care. Karen Furgiuele found a job in sales in an unknown industry after leaving to raise children. Samantha Forrest moved for college and applied to job openings in a variety of industries before landing in pest management. Ravi Sachdeva took over the business founded by his parents.

The ways these professionals ended up in pest management is as unique as they are as individuals. They also represent diversity in an increasingly inclusive industry—but one in which there remains room for improvement.

“One of the constant industry struggles is hiring,” said Forrest, director of operations for Brody Brothers Pest Control. “I believe if we start looking at diversity and the inclusiveness of our businesses individually, we may not struggle with the hiring portion of the business.”

Still, Forrest believes, “we have conversations that need to be had about women in our industry, different races in our industry, the LGBTQIA individuals and many other things that need to be brought up and looked at within our industry.”

Consider this a step in that direction. Allen, Roe, Furgiuele, Forrest and Sachdeva discussed some of the barriers to a more diverse workforce by sharing some of the challenges they’ve faced, providing insight into improvements that can benefit pest management companies and the industry.

## HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A DIVERSE MEMBER OF THE PEST CONTROL INDUSTRY?

Sachdeva took over American Pest Management Inc. after his father’s retirement in 1999. His father, Avtar, who graduated from Kansas State University “was an over-educated immigrant with no job experience in the U.S. and 55 years old. He had \$1,000 to his name and a family, car, friends and vendors that cared for him.”

Sachdeva believes diversity is focused on “thoughts and beliefs.” He believes that embracing diverse thoughts can help build leadership. “As a leader, one must listen and pay heed to a variety of opinions, yet be strong enough to stand up for the decisions and positions the leader takes in an organization for its success. A strong leader does not need ‘yes people’ around him or her, but those who make better arguments so the right course can be charted for the organization.”

## HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TREATED POORLY BECAUSE OF YOUR BACKGROUND?

Allen, who holds a PhD, is a board-certified entomologist and is director of training and technical services for Senske Services, recalls one of the first pest management meetings he attended. “A man grabbed my ID badge and called me a ‘spook,’ which is an older racial term utilized in the southeastern U.S.”

During his academic career, he often found himself the only African American in his graduate school classes. “This realization prompted me to get involved in every activity imaginable and to converse with anyone within arm’s reach. As a result, I learned of opportunities early and this behavior continues to prove beneficial.”

Furgiuele, president of Gardex Chemicals Ltd., was promoted to general sales manager. “One of the salesmen, with over 18 years’ experience, decided to resign rather than have a woman for a boss.”





Hamilton Allen, Senske Services

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—SAMANTHA FORREST,  
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS,  
BRODY BROTHERS PEST CONTROL

Unfortunately, that was hardly an isolated incident. When she was promoted again to vice president, “other vice presidents asked the owner if I was a ‘real’ vice president as they didn’t believe a woman should be promoted to that level in the company.”

Forrest also has encountered discrimination from customers—even women. “One of the challenges I believe most women face, not only in our industry but other industries as well, is being told over the phone or in person, ‘You know less than a technician, or the man, who services my home.’”

She also was told by another female customer that she couldn’t possibly be the person in charge because she was a woman. She said, “these assumptions that gender affects the area of business you are in or how intelligent you are just aren’t correct. Gender doesn’t affect my ability or anyone’s ability to be in any certain position, nor does it affect the knowledge we have acquired through hard work and training. There are so many kick-butt women in this industry who know their stuff and are such an inspiration to me and many others.”

She also finds that being a woman can help with customers. “The majority of the time, we speak to women over the phone; they are the decision makers. I am a mom and I have pets too. I worry about pesticide safety the same as they do. As a woman in this industry, I get to put their minds at ease when I speak to them over the phone.”

**WHAT ASPECTS OF THE CONVERSATION ABOUT WORKPLACE DIVERSITY DO YOU THINK MAY BE OVERLOOKED?**

Roe, manager of marketing and product for Terminix Commercial, identifies as a



Samantha Forrest,  
Brody Brothers Pest Control



Jessica Roe,  
Terminix Commercial



Ravi Sachdeva,  
American Pest Management Inc.



Karen Furgieue,  
Gardex Chemicals Ltd.

minority in several ways. She is a black female Millennial. She believes “it isn’t enough to just recruit women or to just recruit people of color. I think it’s important to also focus on the people who sit at the intersections of multiple minority groups. For example, if only 25 percent of people in the pest control industry are women and only 5 percent of people in the pest control industry are black, the number of black women, especially in leadership positions, is very small. To cultivate an industry that embraces diversity and inclusion, there has to be a conscious effort to make space for those who sit at the intersections or you risk creating more sub-groups of under-represented people.”

Roe had spent most of her career in healthcare sales and marketing. “When I learned Terminix Commercial was looking for a product manager with experience in healthcare, I was intrigued. I always thought of healthcare facilities as sterile, clean environments and it hadn’t crossed my mind that pest control was a service they would need. Once I learned about Terminix Commercial’s commitment to the

healthcare industry, I was excited to join the team. The switch from healthcare technology to pest control was a steep learning curve, but I’ve been here for about a year and a half now and I love it!”

Forrest believes the conversation of diversity is being missed. “I am not only a woman, but I identify as part of the LGBTQIA community, and as a gay woman within our industry, I think a lot of diversity topics are ‘breezed’ over. I have been told our industry just is not quite there yet, in speaking on certain subjects. I believe the NPMA is helping push this subject forward, which is truly significant to see and be a part of.”

#### HOW HAVE YOU BEEN ABLE TO HELP DEVELOP THE CAREERS OF OTHER DIVERSE PROFESSIONALS OR TO ADVOCATE FOR INCREASED DIVERSITY?

Allen serves on the NPMA Diversity Council, “which has led to me working on non-NPMA projects with current and former council members. In addition to the Diversity Council, I’ve made efforts to reach back out

to my alma mater’s Black Graduate Student Organization to showcase my experiences as a professional and to encourage them to keep pushing forward.”

Roe is “still a young professional, so I have not had the opportunity to develop anyone else’s career. However, over the years, I have had mentors who have nurtured my talents and challenged me to grow professionally. Those relationships granted me access to learning opportunities and experiences that have proven invaluable throughout my career. Connecting with people who are invested in my success and watching those same people advocate for me to have a ‘seat at the table’ reinforces the fact that my perspective is valuable. It has also empowered me to advocate for myself. I think mentoring relationships can be particularly beneficial to minorities because they can help remove barriers and promote inclusion on a personal level.”

To learn more about NPMA’s Diversity Council, visit [www.npmapestworld.org/diversity](http://www.npmapestworld.org/diversity). •

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