15. The stars seemed to align for Miller. She got good grades in Associate Professor of Industrial and Systems Engineering David Koonce’s rigorous statistics and database classes (“always a challenge, but they taught me to think like an engineer”), and during her first academic quarter, she wrote a résumé to complete a technical writing assignment. She got an A on the assignment, so she decided to submit the résumé to NASA Glenn Research Center. Within a month, she was hired.

After working as a systems safety engineer on NASA’s Constellation program, through which NASA hopes to send astronauts back to the Moon and to Mars, a contractor based at the Johnson Space Center in Houston hired her. She was able to move to Houston and complete her degree, thanks to the flexibility of the master’s program, which includes an online video component.

Today, Miller works as a safety and operations engineer for extravehicular activities (EVAs—those activities performed outside of the spacecraft in pressurized suits). Her responsibilities include evaluating hardware designs for all NASA safety standards, observing EVA astronaut training activities, and supporting real-time missions from her post at mission control. Some of Miller’s on-the-job training includes taking classes alongside astronauts, like her upcoming stint as a zero-gravity test subject in a C9 aircraft. “To be able to work directly with the astronauts and ‘play’ in the flight mockups with the EVA tools (is) so much fun for me; I can’t believe I get paid to do it,” she says.

Miller acknowledges that deciding to go back to school was intimidating. But she couldn’t be happier that she made the leap. “Returning to school changed my life in ways I could never have imagined,” she says. “It would be great if my story could give others the hope and faith to take that chance.”

Teresa a.k.a. Terri Miller, M.S. ’09, holds an engineer’s dream job: she works at NASA’s Johnson Space Center on the Constellation program, Hubble Space Telescope, and International Space Station. Remarkably, just three years ago, she was a stay-at-home mom who had been out of the workforce so long that she couldn’t even score a job interview. Going back to school to earn a master’s in engineering management from Ohio University is what changed the arc of her career trajectory.

“I was 47 years old, a former NASA engineer, and now a lunch lady,” Miller says, assessing her situation in 2007. She had worked at NASA’s Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, but returned home to raise her three children. She was a single mom working at her kids’ school lunchroom, and she was running into brick walls trying to return to the engineering field.

“I knew I had to change my situation.”

That’s when Miller heard about the master’s in engineering management, a track in the industrial and systems engineering master’s program offered at nearby Lorain County Community College in partnership with Ohio University’s Russ College of Engineering. The program teaches skills needed to manage engineers and other scientists in high-tech fields. “Returning to school was a process of redefining myself and proving to myself that yes, I am still smart even though I haven’t done this for years,” she says.

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The Sky’s the Limit
Former stay-at-home mom works on Space Station, Hubble missions at NASA
By Mary Reed

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