I met with Jessica Hunter at a local coffee shop, Gold Sprint Coffee, on the first chilly Friday of the season. Iced dirty chai with oat milk in hand, Jess jokes that she should have defended her thesis here.

“I wrote my *entire* thesis here,” she says, “and I defended my thesis over Zoom, so I very well could have defended it from this table!”

After graduating with her Master’s degree in English from the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) in 2021, Jess started at MartinFederal Consulting LLC under as a Business Development and Proposal Coordinator. MartinFederal offers other companies support in four main areas: Advanced IT, Cybersecurity, Training, and Engineering and Tech services. Since MartinFederal is a small company, Jess and her coworkers find themselves wearing multiple hats. For Jess, who works at the corporate office’s business development department, this means her day-to-day work life is almost always different. During the height of a proposal process, she could work almost exclusively as a technical writer and editor, creating and editing a proposal on a tight deadline. Now, however, Jess’ job is about 75% business development; her company works on projects they won with her proposals.

Another benefit of working at a small company is getting to work with almost everyone, regardless of their job description.

“I see the president and the secretary every day!”

Depending on the project, Jess will spend her work day with a variety of departments, ranging from Human Resources to the Proposal Writing Team to Upper Management. Hearing how close and comfortable the company felt pushed me to ask my most important question:

“I’m really excited about going into the technical writing field, but I’m worried that being AFAB (assigned female at birth) and femme presenting might put me at a disadvantage. Have you ever felt this way? How did you handle that?”

Jess was passionate in her answer. She worked with UAH’s Student Government Association for years and even served as the SGA Student Body President. Serving in this role
taught her that “there is a balance that fem presenting people have to walk of being assertive but not being a bitch.” As a woman working with subject matter experts, Jess has to hold herself to the standard of being firm, yet not overstepping. Walking that line not only means respecting others, but also respecting the job that she herself works; Jess had stern conversations with co-workers to assert what her job was and that her co-workers needed to treat her as an equal.

Most importantly though, Jess does feel respected by her co-workers. Because Jess works at a small business, it’s easy to see the job that everyone does, even if you don’t understand their job specifications. The members of the proposal team certainly understand Jess’ job best, but even those who do not understand still see the fruits of her labor.

“That’s the perk of working in a small business; everyone does respect the work of everyone else, despite not understanding. It would be clear if someone wasn’t doing their job well, so it’s easy to see how hard everyone is working!”

As an editor, Jess has her hands directly in the proposal writing process. In fact, that’s her number one piece of advice for those looking into proposal writing:

“If you really want to get into proposal writing and go up that ladder, don’t start at the big company. If you can get on somewhere doing small business, you’ll get a lot of hands-on experience.”

When Jess says hands-on experience, she really means it; Jess noted that she often hand edits proposals before submitting them. Why? “You never know if your proposal will be read online or printed out!” Jess also finds editing by hand helps her check for the formatting requirements. Her college proposal writing class taught her a “bare bones” format, but Jess says that each proposal has different requirements, even down to the margins. As an editor, her two biggest tasks are to find those minute details and to ensure a document written by multiple people makes sense, perfecting the proposals before they are sent off to MartinFederal’s potential clients.

Proposal writing comes with many important deadlines, so Jess finds herself working late nights when there’s a big project. She remarks that her first big project was over the Fourth of July weekend, but it was worth the hard work to win the proposal. Working during the COVID era, everyone has an at-home set up and can easily complete these hard-deadline tasks from the comfort of their own home. One thing Jess didn’t expect the pandemic to bring into her work, however, was mentioning the pandemic in every proposal.

“Having to say how we can safely get you travel during travel restrictions as well as keeping labs equally staffed and equally distanced... it’s an interesting thing that wouldn’t have been in my job two years ago!”

Working long, late weeks and sometimes staying up until midnight working from home certainly sounds exhausting. I asked Jess what was most rewarding about her job, especially given the high stress of the proposal writing process, and I was encouraged to hear her answer:

“Even if it’s not always recognized, I know it would be much harder for the company to function without me. I am integral to the team. It’s really rewarding to know that you had a hand in getting the company that work, and maybe even making sure that someone keeps their job.”

Jess’ job certainly has its ups and downs, with varying degrees of stress and day-to-day tasks. Yet Jess finds her work fulfilling, even if her parents don’t understand what she does! She’s happy her team works hard together with mutual respect. As her company’s Business Development and Proposal Coordinator, her job is never dull and always rewarding.