

Learning by the Book: Why Stories Matter More



WTS-LA panel (LaVerne Francis Reid, Dana Hook, Liz Levin, Mary Jane O'Meara, Amanda Heinke, Liz Ramirez, and Grace Crunican) and roundtable program, Photos by John Middelkoop, 2016

Veteran transportation leaders tell a WTS audience the compelling stories that shaped their careers.

Stories provide more than just entertainment. Integral to virtually every culture, stories are a time-honored method to communicate vital information, a way to pass down wisdom from generation to generation. And on September 30, 2015, the WTS Los Angeles Area Chapter welcomed WTS International past presidents Grace Crunican and Liz Levin and a panel of women from their new book *Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom: Transportation Women Tell Their Stories* to pass on wisdom they've gained from their lives and careers.

"This program was a fantastic opportunity for us as a chapter. We heard the book was coming out, and we wanted to take advantage of that and Grace and Liz's willingness to join us in person," explains WTS Los Angeles president and Fehr & Peers transportation planner Amanda Heinke, who arranged for the chapter to present every attendee with a copy of the book. "And the program was great!"

Curt Pringle & Associates public affairs expert Elizabeth Ramirez agrees. "The women on the panel were fantastic—intelligent, funny, and moving. Women and men in the audience could really relate to the experiences that they shared from the book. *Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom* is a great tool for WTS chapters to engage women to grow in the industry. The only regret I have is that the program wasn't longer, as I didn't want it to end! It felt like it just flew by."



Presented in two parts, the first part offered a panel featuring CDM Smith vice president Dana Hook, former director of the Tobin Bridge and HNTB associate vice president Mary Jane O'Meara, and former Federal Aviation Administration airports division manager LaVerne Francis Reid. With Bay Area Rapid



Transit general manager Crunican leading the discussion, Levin, Hook, O'Meara, and Reid shared stories from the book and anecdotes from their experience. The audience listened with rapt attention.

"It was intense. You could hear a pin drop. People were really paying close attention and hanging on every word," explains Crunican. "And the women on the panel spoke very frankly. Dana talked about being gay and out as well as values in the workplace. LaVerne gave great advice about thinking ahead and preparing for the future way in advance. And each woman spoke honestly and compellingly about confronting ethical issues. Mary Jane even talked about being asked by the governor to fire someone and refusing to do it! People were stunned by what the ladies had to say. It was a learning experience for everyone. And because the women really opened up about their personal and professional experiences, there was a real warmth in the room for them."



"People were engaged. They were very excited to meet the speakers and hear their stories," adds Levin, a former MassDOT and MBTA board member and founder and president of Liz Levin & Company. "It was a very diverse crowd, from a lovely group of students to very senior

women and men. And the women on the panel were a great representation for the book. LaVerne and Dana told very personal stories and how their personal stories shaped their approach to work. Mary Jane is a natural entertainer, who told about standing up for what she believed in. There was a great hunger for that in the audience because everyone in the workplace is trying very hard to balance the personal with the professional."

More than 125 guests—including 20 students from UCLA, USC, and Cal State Northridge—packed the Emerald Room at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles for the afternoon program. Then, after the panel presentation concluded, WTS members joined Crunican, Levin, Hook, O'Meara, and Reid for the second part of the program, a series of intimate roundtable discussions. The roundtable portion gave ample opportunity for participants to explore in greater depth the questions and issues raised during the panel. By all accounts, this part of the program took the event to an even more profound level.



According to METRANS assistant director Victoria Valentine Deguzman, the program was "truly exceptional." And the women on the panel were, "warm, articulate, engaging, genuine, professional, and intriguing. The students were afforded such a delightful and inspirational experience. Lynn Feng (our lead student assistant) and I stayed for the roundtable discussions and appreciated the chance to talk personally with Grace, Liz, and the other women in that setting. This has to be the best WTS event I have attended yet."

Michelle Chavez, an administrative manager with EPC Consultants on the Metro Regional Connector Transit Project, concurs. "I was particularly interested in and excited to attend, and I was not disappointed! It was a great panel of such inspirational women. Some I already knew, or knew of, and some I didn't, but I found their openness and personal stories so

inspiring. Now I find myself telling other women at the office and outside friends and peers about the program and repeating the stories the women told, as well as their final words of wisdom.



“Also, I had purchased the book prior to the program and I as I read it I found myself nodding my head and thinking, ‘I’m going through this right now!’ Their words showed me that things can get better or there is life after this current obstacle. These are all things I should know, but validation that it’s possible is very helpful.”

Foothill Transit Director of Finance Michelle Caldwell felt great kinship with the women on the panel. As a veteran transportation professional, she, too, knows the struggles a successful career can entail. She sees the book as providing a much-needed service for women and men in the transportation industry. “What I liked most about the

book is the closing, ‘the next chapter is yours.’ Like the women in the book, I love to tell my story to young women about how I got into public transportation, how one job interview changed my life forever, and how losing everything turned out to be an enormous blessing. This was one of the best events!”

Stories have power. And they provide more than just entertainment. Stories are an important cultural mechanism to pass down wisdom from generation to generation. In their book, *Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom*, transportation professionals Liz Levin and Grace Crunican have done just that in print, sharing hundreds of years of collective wisdom from 18 successful women transportation professionals. And through the WTS-LA panel and roundtable program on September 30, Crunican and Levin joined women from their book to impart that wisdom directly to WTS Los Angeles members.