

The Tao of Volunteering



Kyra Tao (WSP|Parsons Brinckerhoff transportation engineer and WTS-LA Volunteer Committee chair) and Cassie Gogreve (Master's degree candidate in planning at USC), Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Ben Franklin said, “An investment in knowledge pays the best dividend.” But he never said specifically *how* to gain that knowledge. WSP|Parsons Brinckerhoff transportation engineer and WTS-LA Volunteer Committee chair Kyra Tao knows an exceptional way for professionals to make that investment in knowledge and gain an extraordinary dividend.

“Volunteering for WTS-LA brings many large and small benefits. First, it is the only way where you can learn leadership skills in a safe, supportive, yet challenging environment. And you actually learn to lead by leading. But you also extend and enhance your professional and social network in the transportation industry with some of its most powerful leaders. In addition, many volunteers also gain ‘hard’, technical skills, tangible skills they can use in their careers. So volunteering for WTS-LA really is a comprehensive investment in your professional and personal advancement.”



Tao would know. She maintains a database with more than 200 WTS-LA volunteers. Last year, more than 40 people regularly volunteered for the chapter, each averaging between 5-10 hours per month. Volunteers participated in a wide range of areas including Programs, Membership, the Transportation Resume Book, Social Media/Communications, and a whole host of other areas and functions as well. For Tao, though, it's never about the numbers.

“The women and men who volunteer for WTS-LA are, on the whole, very driven, compassionate, and committed. They want to help the chapter and help advance women in transportation, but they also want to advance their own careers. You can tell by the type of people who volunteer that they will use their experience to become leaders of the chapter and the transportation industry someday. So volunteering attracts a certain type of young professional, one that wants to grow and constantly improve.”

There is no one volunteer prototype. But certain characteristics do seem present in all of the volunteers. Tao cites two volunteers who have accomplished quite a bit for the chapter that are representative of the caliber of young professionals who volunteer



“Currently, I am working on the geotechnical design of the NFL stadium in Inglewood that will be the new home for the Los Angeles Rams. It is a very exciting project, and to be a part of a project with such great complexity has been an invaluable experience for me,” explains Group Delta geotechnical engineer and WTS-LA volunteer Stephanie Gunawan-Piraner, PE. Gunawan-Piraner has worked on many signature projects in Southern California including the Regional Connector Transit Corridor, the Purple Line Extension, the Gerald Desmond Bridge Replacement, and the California

High-Speed Rail. And that is only the short list. She also earned both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in civil and environmental engineering from UCLA. Despite her busy schedule, she still volunteers her time to the chapter.

“I was introduced to WTS-LA through (Curt Pringle & Associates Director of Community Outreach and WTS-LA Communications Chair) Liz Ramirez. I had heard about WTS-LA because other engineers in our company had participated in several WTS events. When I joined Liz at my first WTS event, I found that the event was very engaging and thought-provoking. I was also impressed that there was equal participation from both men and women, which I was not used to seeing. Being a female engineer working in the transportation industry, advancing women in transportation is a cause I wholeheartedly support. But that’s not the only reason I volunteer.

“WTS-LA has a lot of quality speakers that come from every part of the transportation world. They are the decision makers in the transportation industry. When we work on projects and dig deep into the technical details, it is sometimes easy to forget the bigger picture. There are many high-level legislative decisions and public opinion that go into these projects. WTS-LA gives me a chance to get that bigger picture, to understand that there is a lot more to the project than just the technical problems.”

Gunawan-Piraner spends the bulk of her volunteer time on reconciliation tasks or helping the chapter reclaim funds owed. Though it may not sound glamorous, reconciliation is critical to the chapter’s financial health. But her focus remains on the bigger picture and the benefits that accrue from being an active WTS-LA volunteer.

“You build your network. You get exposure to a lot of different disciplines. It’s really opened my eyes. WTS-LA fosters genuine open communication between a community of professionals. And here’s the great thing. If I have specific questions about a project or a particular decision that a transportation agency like LAWA, Metro, or Port of Long Beach is taking, WTS provides that opportunity for me to have an up close and personal dialogue with the responsible key decision makers. I am directly connected to these individuals. That, to me, is invaluable.”

Cassie Gogreve agrees. And the master’s degree candidate in planning at USC also shares Gunawan-Piraner’s belief that volunteering for WTS-LA is transformative in both in the micro and macro scales.

“Volunteering for WTS-LA has been one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve ever had, and I volunteer a lot. They’re so organized. People follow up with me and thank me. I’ve had people come to me and tell me that they’ve heard of me from other WTS-LA members. So, people know who I am now. I was invited

to join a committee because of my volunteering. And I've gained a couple of mentors from volunteering, two very accomplished professionals: one works for AECOM and one works for STV. They meet me for lunch, help me edit my résumé, and give me professional advice and guidance. They've really been very helpful to me."

Gogreve volunteered at several programs last year. At present, she serves on the Transportation Résumé Book and the Scholarship committees. Though she believes she's gained from every volunteering experience at WTS-LA, one program in particular stands out.

"Being involved with programs is great. But one program really stood out for me. It featured the book *Boots on the Ground, Flats in the Boardroom: Transportation Women Tell Their Stories* (a book with firsthand accounts from women who rose in transportation) and the women that wrote it. That was *exceptional*. I got to escort one of the panel members and attend the roundtable discussion afterwards. It was almost all executives and managers—and me! That program was so moving and enriching. It was very personal. It was all about these women, their lives, and the challenges they faced working in the transportation industry. It really affected me."

Gogreve served as a Systemwide Planning intern at Metro for two years. Having graduated on May 13, she now plans to work with her WTS-LA mentors to help figure out her next steps.

"An investment in knowledge pays the best dividend." While correct, Ben Franklin never specified how to gain that knowledge and earn that dividend. Fortunately for young transportation professionals in Southern California, Kyra Tao has the answer: volunteer for WTS-LA.