

C'est La Guerra: Training to Fight the Good Fight



Maria Guerra (Former Metro Chief of Staff and WTS-LA president), Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Former Metro Chief of Staff and former president of her own eponymous consulting firm, Maria Guerra views serving as WTS-LA president in 2007 and 2008 as essential training for virtually any career.

“Being WTS-LA president enhanced *all* my skills, skills necessary to be successful in any organization, public or private, large or small. It was just such a huge opportunity to take advantage of every skill-building need you could ever have. Being president taught me how to learn to deal with the unexpected. For example, I was *not* scheduled to be president, but at the last minute the 1st vice president wasn't able to take the reins. So I took over.”

Now retired from transportation, Guerra served as Metro Chief of Staff for five years and was one of the highest-ranking women in Southern California transportation at the time. After leaving Metro, she formed Maria A. Guerra Associates, a firm that provided advanced strategic government facilitation services for developers, private firms, cities, service organizations and individuals that dealt with governments, public agencies, and administrations. Guerra sees her time as WTS-LA president as critical to her professional success, particularly for when things were *not* going smoothly.



“It was pretty tense at first. I was prepared to be 1st vice president and take on programs. So not only did I lose those two years of practice for being president, I also lost the opportunity to better understand programs as well as I probably should have. I was really jumping into cold water fast! Also I was president during the middle of a recession. So we were losing members left and right. And we were trying to hold onto members, while companies were cutting back memberships, cutting back on spending, etc. It was a really tough time and we were just trying to maintain the integrity and value of the organization. We wanted to make sure that our members were getting a good return on their investment.”

The struggle would intensify. Guerra's father died during her presidency. But that too became a teachable moment for her.

“Being president taught me that you can get through anything. My father and I were very close and his death hit me very hard during my presidency. I took some time to regroup, but it was important to me to go back to being president. I had people all around me telling me, ‘You really don't have to do this if you

don't want to.' But I told them that I *needed* to do it. I got a lot of hugs and support from WTS-LA during that time. It was a blessing to be president for me then.”

Guerra worked tirelessly to turn the chapter around. But on reflection, that wasn't her most rewarding accomplishment.

“We hosted a trip to the Panama Canal when I was president and that was incredible. It was just a wonderful experience for me personally and professionally. It was the opportunity of a lifetime to see the Panama Canal in a way that no one else gets to see it. We got a behind-the-scenes, up-close-and-personal tour of this wonder. So we were in a little boat up next to these huge boats coming through the canal. Most tourists never get to see what we saw. But that is a great illustration of the kind of access you get through WTS that you can't get anywhere else.

“We were able to put that trip together because of the access our people in WTS-LA had with people connected to the canal and the project to expand it. CH2M Hill was working on the expansion project and they were our local hosts. It was an opportunity of a lifetime that we could take full advantage of because we were part of WTS-LA. And I got to the lead the trip because I was the president. How else could I have gotten to do something like that?”

This article is part of our 30th Anniversary Presidents Series.