

High-Speed Grail: Melissa de la Peña's Leadership Training for Women



Melissa de la Peña (Cordoba Corporation Regional Manager), Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Cordoba Corporation regional manager Melissa de la Peña views her 2011-2012 WTS-LA presidency as challenging, rewarding, and enlightening. But it was more than that, too. It provided a consummate training ground for leadership and a forum for access.

“The facetime we got with our dignitaries and speakers was invaluable. Our illustrious program speakers included the likes of former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, former acting administrator of the Federal Transit Administration Therese McMillan, and then-administrator of the Federal Highway Department Victor Mendez. But there were so many others that I would never have gotten the chance to meet if it weren't for WTS-LA. So it made it worth the risk of taking on the role of the presidency, even though I didn't follow the 'typical' path to the position. I'm very lucky that the board approached me with the opportunity and also that my mentors were encouraging and supportive.”

WTS-LA was lucky as well. De la Peña's tenure heralded significant advances in the chapter. Though never easy, the lessons learned proved as indelible as the effort.



“Just taking on the role of president was transformative. Between leading board meetings, running programs, dealing with international board functions, and working in unison with such an amazing board, I learned so much. That was despite my already complex and challenging workload. And being president opened a large door to many roads of advancement. But the most important personal lesson for me was how rewarding and important volunteer work is, especially in support of something like the advancement of women in transportation. We've made strides over the years—with women at every level in their careers—and WTS extends a strong hand that continues to foster diverse female leaders nationwide. As part of this story, I want to acknowledge CH2M, which was extremely supportive both in terms of my time as president and as a corporate partner to the chapter. They made my experience possible.”

Today as part of the Rail Delivery Partner Team through Cordoba Corporation, also a strong corporate advocate for WTS-LA, de la Peña serves as the regional manager for the Burbank to Los Angeles to

Post Date: Apr.26, 2016

Anaheim corridor of the 800-mile California High Speed Rail project. More specifically, she is responsible for the overall management of a multi-disciplinary consulting team handling the planning, public outreach, conceptual and preliminary design, and the preparation of required environmental documentation. And de la Peña is perfectly suited for the job. She brings more than 20 years of experience in transportation engineering and management of large infrastructure projects in Southern California. But de la Peña credits her time as WTS-LA president as pivotal to complimenting those skills and that experience.

“Working with the board and just being part of the work that we accomplished was the highlight of my presidency. I was especially in awe of my vice president of Programs, Diane Ricard. Although she relocated to Massachusetts Port Authority during my presidency, the evidence of her work in Programs and with the incoming board members is still very evident on the board today. The past presidents were also a wealth of knowledge for me. I don’t think I’ll ever work with a more dedicated, hardworking, and reliable group of people.”