

Neilia LaValle Found Her True Career Path on a Right of Way



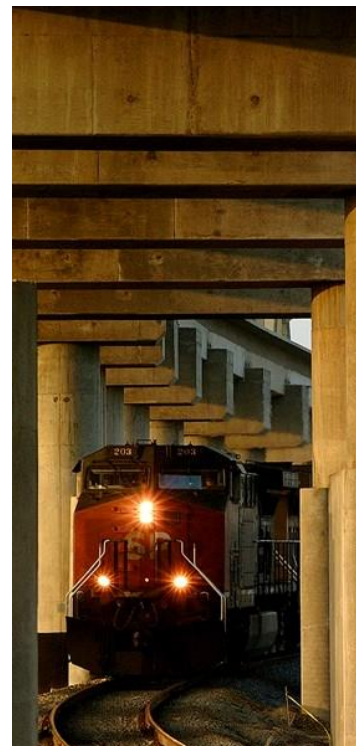
Neilia LaValle, Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Nearly 40 years ago, Neilia LaValle stepped out of the classroom and into a new venture. It soon proved to be one of the best decisions she ever made for herself and the industry where she would soon distinguish herself.

“I was teaching vocal music at a high school in my home town in Louisiana when I left for Houston, Texas to start a new career as a right of way agent working in the oil and gas industry. A few years later, there was an oil crisis and work slowed down. I had friends in California so in early 1986, I moved to Southern California where I very quickly landed a job as a right of way consultant for a local land services company. That was my first foray into working on public and public transportation projects. A couple of years later, an engineering firm recruited and hired me as its land services manager.

“In 1993, with encouragement from several of our clients, my soon-to-be business partner, Joel Sewell, and I left the engineering firm and started Paragon Partners Ltd. with our last paycheck and our credit cards. We wanted a name that would represent our personal philosophy and something that would grow beyond the two of us. In researching *Roget’s Thesaurus* for ideas, we found the perfect word—*paragon*—meaning a ‘pattern of excellence.’ Within two months, we had over 30 employees. We never wrote a real business plan and we have never had to borrow money to operate. Our business plan was simple: we plan to stay in business and we plan to be profitable. And it worked! Over the last 23 years, we continued to grow and expand both our services and our geographical reach. It got a bit scary a couple of times as we expanded to other regions of the country, but we made it.”

Headquartered in Huntington Beach, California, Paragon continues to grow and expand today, with regional offices in California in Sacramento and Fresno, and in Houston, Reno, Honolulu, and Anchorage. Paragon handles right of way and real estate in both the public and private sectors and in every arena from pipelines and power lines to telecom and transportation. Leveraging its institutional knowledge, expertise, and quality focus, Paragon made its bones as the first right of way consultant on the Alameda Corridor Project, as a direct contractor to the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority (ACTA).



“We did the right of way for all of the north-end improvement projects for ACTA. That engagement, our contacts, and the quality of our work led to our landing the Real Estate Program Management contract for the Alameda Corridor East Transportation Authority. I am very proud to say that we’ve been on that project for over 16 years. But, it’s quite common for us to have long-term engagements and numerous repeat customers. We built our business on providing a valuable product and responsive service.

“If we found during our QA/QC process that the work product didn’t quite represent the quality we wanted in a deliverable, my partner and I would work with staff to redo or correct it before it was sent to our client. We always want to make sure a quality product goes out the door and that we are developing best-in-class solutions for future projects. It takes that kind of commitment to excellence to really succeed.

“Many of our projects often involve multiple jurisdictions and regulatory requirements. For example, when working on a pipeline project there’s a difference between a liquids pipeline and natural gas pipelines as they’re regulated by different governmental entities, which then vary for interstate and intrastate systems. The approach to transportation projects has similar complexity as the approach depends upon the funding source and what agency has oversight. My experience includes a multiplicity of agencies at the local, state and federal levels.

“And, as right of way professionals, we have to know the principles of appraisal, negotiations, right of way engineering, land title, relocation assistance, property management, and project management. And, we must be able to read and interpret maps and engineering drawings, so having a deep bench with outstanding technical depth is a necessity. In right of way, complex rules and regulations are the norm. Going above and beyond the norm by employing and training excellent people with the needed skills is Paragon’s advantage. That’s why we’re so exacting about getting it right and about who we bring onto our team. The bottom line is that our service and lasting reputation is *everything*.”

LaValle also believes strongly in equality and organizations that help promote it, particularly WTS.

“I’ve been a member of WTS Los Angeles for many years. I got involved when we were working with the ACTA project in the late 1990s. Later, I also joined WTS Orange County to further my involvement and continue building relationships. For me, I feel that WTS brings tremendous value to the industry. The scholarship program is outstanding. I love going to the awards banquets every year to meet all the wonderfully bright and amazing young women who are very deservedly receiving scholarships. And the monthly programs are equally as rewarding with timely topics and speakers. WTS is as relevant today as the day it was created.”

“In addition to WTS, I also belong to the International Right of Way Association (IRWA). In 1988, I was asked to participate on the International Pipeline Committee for the IRWA and was the first female to ever be included on this particular committee. Later, I served the Committee as Secretary, Vice-Chair and then as Chair for two years. When I was working back in Texas in the 1980s, a very seasoned rancher said to me, ‘You’re the first female landman I’ve ever met.’ The point is, we still work in a very male-dominated arena.

“Put simply, I feel WTS helps create a more positive environment for women. Through WTS, I continue to meet and be impressed and humbled by so many remarkable women who have accomplished so much and so much more than me. And, I send and encourage my employees and other women I meet in our industry to join WTS and go to programs. I tell them, “Enrich yourself by developing relationships with like-minded and goal-driven members, and there is no doubt that your skills and industry knowledge will flourish.”