

Balance Beaming: Tina Backstrom on Raising a Family and a Career



Tina Backstrom, PE (Project Manager/Team Lead and WTS-LA Diversity and Recognitions Chair), Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Project manager/team lead and WTS-LA Diversity and Recognitions chair Tina Backstrom, PE, has used her talent and expertise to help the Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) keep Los Angeles moving in a variety of ways for more than 20 years. And the LADOT has returned the favor.

“I have had a gamut of exciting and interesting jobs at LADOT, but the one I absolutely loved was working as a project manager in the bikeways division, building up Los Angeles’s bicycle network. But the most challenging assignment was my role as one of the department’s public information officers. In that capacity I represented the department to the media. No matter what type of question they threw at me, I had to make sure that my response was not from a place of emotion, but from facts. And gathering all the facts can be challenging in itself. I also had to know everything that was going on in the department. And we handle everything from traffic management, taxi franchises, pipeline franchises, permit parking, parking meters, parking tickets, design and installation/construction of traffic control devices, bicycle facilities, pedestrian facilities, para-transit services and transit. Just to name a few of our responsibilities...”



Today as LADOT project manager and team lead, Backstrom manages capital projects built by Metro. But she joined LADOT as an engineering assistant and worked her way up through the ranks. It was not a direct path.

“I did things sort of backwards, then sideways, then finally I focused. My role as a mother was my first foray into leadership. I was a young mother and wife who was forced to lead my family at a very early age. Gaining that confidence allowed me to move upward with no real fear. I started my career while in college as the environmental/safety manager for a large printing company. They saw something in me and gave me a chance. Once I graduated from USC, I started to work for the city. I worked, was promoted, but then ‘life got in the way.’ My role as a mother took over and I focused my energy into my girls. I remarried, took on the responsibilities of 3 additional children, then gave birth to 2 more. So 7

children later, I refocused my career. I started to take classes and reengage with our profession, so that I could compete with the 'young' people out there.

"I would definitely say, wait till you are at least 27 before you start a family (and I mean get married, not have children yet). This is so you can focus on your career without having to neglect your family or feel guilty. It is a difficult balance between career and family. And I don't care how you spin it; someone will be affected. I was fortunate that I had a spouse who was mature and understood that, and actually took on family responsibilities as well."

She also credits her success to another important element.

"I first learned about WTS when Gloria Jeff was our general manager. But then, I just didn't understand the significance of the organization. My former general manager Jaime De La Vega reintroduced me to WTS-LA; he always stressed the importance of getting involved. Then I found my mentor through WTS-LA's Mentorship Program. I think I was the oldest mentee that ever went through the program! But I was assigned Metro COO Lonnie Mitchell as my mentor. He introduced me to *everyone* and gave me books to read. Through Lonnie I met Darryl Johnson, then COO of OCTA, and he shared his powerful story with me. Where else could I make those kinds of connections?"