

Puja Thomas-Patel: A Force Built by Committee



Puja Thomas-Patel (WTS-LA Annual Scholarship and Awards Dinner Committee Chair), Photos © John Livzey, 2017

Abraham Lincoln said, “Don’t worry when you are not recognized, but strive to be worthy of recognition.” And that is sage advice. But *someone* must worry about recognizing achievement, particularly in Southern California transportation. And that responsibility falls largely to the WTS-LA Annual Scholarship and Awards Dinner Committee and its chair Puja Thomas-Patel. Taking that responsibility most seriously, she sees it as a true group effort over time.

“I had a wonderful committee and I had lots of help throughout the year. Last year’s chair [and WTS-LA Programs and Professional Development VP] Lisa Karwoski was amazing in providing so much advice and institutional knowledge and helping with so many different things. Janet Marroquin handled the registration, which she has done for the past two years. That’s tremendously helpful, because registration is a huge task. Many people don’t realize how important or difficult that is and she took care of almost all of it. She was so helpful. Also, Sylvia Aldrete managed the raffle and silent auction, which was also incredibly helpful. She, too, has done that for the past couple of years. Kate Bridges was also extremely helpful in managing the sponsorships. And finally, [Special Advisor to the President] Sheila Given, also was instrumental in bringing the script to life. It really was a group effort throughout the year. But my circumstances also made their contributions that much more important.



“I’m still on maternity leave; I had my baby three months ago, and I was gone from WTS-LA for about a month. When I came back, I discovered that everyone had kept everything moving forward without a hitch. For example, Kate had sold all of the sponsorship opportunities except one! That was amazing.”

Ms. Thomas-Patel truly does credit the committee for not missing a beat during her absence. Their work is both a testament to their commitment and to her leadership. Of course, the ultimate test of the committee’s success hinges on the committee’s ultimate goal—the actual scholarship and awards dinner. By necessity, it informs everything the committee does. Evidently, all of the hard work and team work paid off.

On the evening of November 9th, WTS-LA hosted its 31st Annual Scholarship and Awards Dinner. Featuring a passel of transportation luminaries, both presenting and receiving awards, the program also featured high school, undergraduate, and graduate students receiving monetary scholarships and speaking quite personally about the meaning of the awards. It was nothing short of astounding, as many of the young students were the first in their families to go to college. But it was a standout night in other ways, too. Ms. Thomas-Patel explains.



“We awarded \$71,000 in scholarships. That’s a record. There were 14 young women who received anywhere from \$2,500 to \$10,000. That will help each one of them pursue their careers and make things easier for them as they start college or graduate school. It’s such an amazing amount of money and such wonderful help that WTS-LA is able to offer. We were also able to raise over \$40,000 towards next year’s scholarships. And we did things a little differently this year; we wanted to change the feel of the program. So, we allowed more people to come up and speak from the committee and from a number of different areas.

“We had a wide range of people speaking, which I really liked a lot. I thought that was very important, because it gave us the opportunity to show off the depth of our board and membership. It made the program more inclusive. And it also gave us an opportunity to acknowledge people who worked so hard for the chapter throughout the year. For example, WTS-LA High School Scholarship chair Tina Backstrom announced an award. Our committee’s VP, Noopur Jain, announced an award. Lisa Karwoski helped give away the Directors’ Award. I went up and thanked a sponsor. We couldn’t showcase everyone, but we tried to get as many people up there as possible, and I think that made the program more personal. And we were extremely fortunate to have Kathy [Simons] as our president. She did such a *wonderful* job as host of the event. The emcees were exceptional as well. They were funny and extremely well prepared. They were great to work with. Between Kathy, the emcees, and my committee, I couldn’t have asked for a better experience.”



Abraham Lincoln said, “Don’t worry when you are not recognized, but strive to be worthy of recognition.” Though Puja Thomas-Patel and her committee went to great lengths to recognize both transportation professionals and students, they earned their own form of recognition by doing a superlative job throughout the year and delivering an exceptional evening awards dinner program.