

With WTS-LA, Rachel Vandenberg doesn't believe it's who you know: it's whom...



Rachel Vandenberg (Dewberry Vice President), Photos © John Livzey, 2017

Dewberry vice president Rachel Vandenberg believes that serving as WTS-LA president offers many unique rewards. But one particular benefit has served her best during her more than two decades long career in transportation.

“The single greatest advantage of being WTS-LA president are the relationships you develop. The enduring professional and personal network that I created while WTS-LA president has helped me throughout my career. However, with WTS I also think the professional and the personal overlap; you can't divide the two. That makes them even more valuable. My personal relationships led directly to mentorship from my peers. And my professional relationships helped expand my reach and effectiveness in different parts of the transportation industry. So, those relationships are invaluable. But being president also teaches you something crucial about leadership.

“As a volunteer organization, WTS-LA forces you to lead through collaboration and influence. You can't direct and demand. You've got to learn to motivate people. You must learn to work together with people in a manner that's helpful in all aspects of your life, to find common goals and interests that will inspire everyone to invest their own time and energy to achieve a common goal. That's incredibly valuable, whether you work in the public or private sectors, no matter what your job title is. If you can motivate people in a non-profit context, you can definitely be more effective in a corporate context. People think your organizational structure determines your influence. But I think your ability to work with people that don't necessarily report to you is even more important. Relationship building in an organization like WTS-LA is invaluable in that regard.”

Vandenberg also cites two aspects that helped shape her presidency, as well as a vital lesson she learned from her service.

“As chapter president, you must speak publicly, and that forced me to face a pretty big fear I had. The first scholarship dinner I presided over had more than 300 people in the audience. That was terrifying! But with WTS-LA, I quickly realized that these were friendly faces and that I was going to survive. It really taught me not to be afraid, and to speak much better in public. Just doing it again and again really helped. It was a safe arena to practice and learn.

“The second meaningful element of my presidency were the doors the office opened for me. For example, I met Jolene Molitoris, then FRA administrator, at a national conference while I was president. She said, “Call me any time you need anything.” I did. And she answered my call. And we've been friends ever

since. So, it really struck me how important those relationships really are, and the value of WTS-LA. When we talk about networking, it's not lip service. It's real. Jolene was happy to hear from me and we're still close friends. So, it's the combination of that kind of access along with the relationships that develop from it that separates WTS-LA from virtually every other organization."

Vandenberg is modest about her achievements. Though the chapter made great strides during her tenure, she often credits others for her success.



"The terms before and after mine really defined my presidency. Stacey Jones and Sheila Given bookended my term, and they set the bar for the professionalism and image of the chapter. You can see how it's grown and taken hold over the years, particularly with the continued involvement of those two women, and others, to ensure the chapter remains on the cutting edge of professionalism and women's advancement in transportation. It's really the go-to organization for transportation in the LA area. That era was when we took the chapter to the next level. And it was the result of the hard work and dedication of a lot of great people."