

## Community Quest: The Heart of the Spiel



*Shenae Rourk, Photos © John Livzey, 2017*

Famed film writer/director Billy Wilder said, “Everybody in the audience is an idiot, but taken together they’re a genius.” Though most community-outreach experts rarely view individuals so critically, Wilder touches on the exact challenge community-outreach experts face. And only those with the right mix of sensitivity, purpose, determination, and savvy can corral public sentiment while enlightening without offense. It can be a tightrope walk. Redwood Resources managing principal and WTS-LA member Shenae Rourk possesses such expertise. And it is hard-won.

“We’ve been around since 1994. And our goal is to engage small businesses and help them grow through publicly funded contracts. One of the ways we accomplish this is by partnering with primes and creating and identifying opportunities for small businesses and minority and women-owned businesses. LGBT-owned businesses are also becoming of interest to some agencies right now, as well as service-disabled ones. So, we find them and strategically align them with the right public agency at the right time to form ongoing, long-term relationships that benefit both parties. We want relationships that grow and foster future projects.” A veteran of public outreach, Rourk is careful to stay ahead of current trends and opportunities. She cites a recent example.

“We developed an award-winning mentor-protégé program for Alameda County. It incorporated customized training for the subcontractors on a group of projects. Right now, we really see a lot of agencies looking at mentor-protégé programs and including them in their bidding scopes. We’ve seen it in transportation projects coming out. We’ve seen it in federal government projects. Counties are starting to embrace it. So, mentor-protégé programs are a big catalyst for moving forward at present. And that’s because mentor-protégé programs are extremely valuable. We’ve seen some federal programs propel small businesses into becoming multimillion-dollar businesses. They generate more success than many people perceive.”



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“That’s because when you’re in a mentor-protégé relationship, you invest in success. You plant a seed that you want to help grow. That’s where agencies are seeing that alignment working really well. They’re testing that on the Purple Line, for example. The RFP for the Purple Line is out and approximately 25% of the small business work must go toward mentor-protégé programs. But again, it’s not just saying I need a sub and picking one off of a list. We really help determine who is going to be a good fit.”

But that’s not the only way Rourk advances women and small businesses in Southern California. A strong believer in workforce development, she’s also active on several other fronts. For example, she is currently chairperson of the Transportation Business Advisory Council (TBAC), a consortium of “professional business associations representing an array of industries and trades.” And she is the current president of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO-LA) in Los Angeles, where she focuses primarily on helping women business owners engage in public sector opportunities.

“NAWBO-LA wants to make sure that women business owners have a seat at the table, and I want public sector agencies to see us as a resource. But my work with NAWBO-LA and TBAC are all of a piece. When it comes down to it, this is essentially about growth, and oftentimes that means workforce development. And that is extremely important. While many programs focus on established professionals, I also want to reach down to young people. So, with Hensel Phelps in Northern California we developed a youth engagement program called *Because of Construction I Can*. That program draws young people starting around 14 or 15 years old from a variety of communities to engage them in learning about construction and construction careers. And it’s really opened their eyes as to construction being a viable career.”

Of course, this is all a natural outgrowth of Rourk’s philosophy and training. Starting as a consultant in Oakland doing disparity studies, public engagement, and community outreach, she next became a business development expert for A/E firms, focusing on strategic and minority firm relationships. Then, after a brief stint in the semiconductor industry, she returned to the A/E world. She also discovered WTS. And she involves herself in WTS-LA for good reason.

“I came to WTS because I really am about women empowerment. And there’s no other group out there that really supports and encourages women in transportation. I’ve gone to meetings in northern and southern California and this group really gets it. It really does provide access to transportation and leaders.”

Recently, Rourk took on a special project with WTS-LA member and STV transportation planner Doreen Zhao.

“We’ve been tasked with identifying all past awardees and scholarship winners for the WTS-LA Annual Scholarship and Awards Dinner. It’s fascinating to see how people have parlayed a scholarship into a substantial career. It’s been very exciting.”

She also credits WTS for providing an essential intangible for women.

“It really is about encouraging women to think bigger. I came from small and humble beginnings. At its heart, WTS-LA is about the belief that women create their own destiny.”