

As a Planner, Doreen Zhao Understands Patience



Doreen Zhao, Photos © John Livzey, 2018

Doreen Zhao spends a lot of time in the future. As a planning lead for STV, she must envision how any number of complex transportation projects can be planned and executed, including the Burbank to Los Angeles Project Section of the California High-Speed Rail Project and several projects with LA Metro. But there's something odd about her work and spending so much time in the future. She knows that she won't see much of what she works on for quite some time.

"When the high-speed rail project gets built, it will be decades from now. I guess all of my projects are that way. By the time they're built, I'll be much older. Probably my children will be riding them! It's a little strange to be planning for something that's so far in the future. There are so many unknowns. Think about it. Who knows what people will be doing then in terms of transportation? What technologies will be invented and implemented? We can never know what the future will bring. But there is a constant that grounds us in planning—community. We must keep in mind and do our best to plan for the communities that we serve. So, we do a lot of engagement with communities. We do a lot of outreach, because these communities must live with the transportation we create. While it's very easy to get caught up in the technical stuff, it's also very important to remember the big-picture perspective when you're planning transportation."

With STV for over four years, Ms. Zhao credits the firm with giving her opportunity to work on an array of different projects.

"Most people don't get to do environmental and transit planning. It's usually a little bit of one or the other. I've been fortunate to have the chance to work on both types of planning. It's really nice being a bit of a hybrid planner. Also, people here at STV are wonderful and very diverse. We have a wide range of expertise and I get to interact with many of them on a daily basis. That's been a great part of the job. I'm not pigeonholed at all. I'm constantly interacting with different disciplines and it forces me to think in different terms. That makes me a better planner. It's really a very supportive workplace."

Ms. Zhao also credits STV for its long-standing support of WTS-LA. And she's no stranger to WTS-LA and what it can do for one's career.

"I got my master's degree in planning from UCLA. And while I was there, I won the 2013 WTS-LA Myra Frank Scholarship. But it was a real surprise. I had heard about the scholarship through UCLA, but I procrastinated in filling out the application. Then I ended up dropping it off at (WTS-LA Scholarship chair) Elisabeth Rosenson's house on the day it was due. I thought I made a bad impression and that I blew it by getting it in right under the wire. So, I was a little shocked when I won. It was definitely a big honor and I got to go to the awards dinner and meet a lot of people. Then, the more I learned about Myra Frank and her legacy, the more I felt like it was a bigger and bigger honor."

Today, Ms. Zhao spreads her time and expertise across several WTS-LA initiatives including the Professional Development Committee. She believes strongly in the principle of giving back and volunteering. But one particular aspect of the chapter's mission stands out for her.



"I really like working with emerging transportation professionals. When I was at UCLA, I began volunteering at WTS-LA events. As a student, everyone encourages you to network. But it's not that simple for students. In fact, it's really nerve wracking when you're a student and you don't know anyone. You don't know where to start or what to do. You can get very self-conscious. But the people at the WTS-LA events I volunteered at were really nice. They made me feel more comfortable talking to people. And as I volunteered at more events, I got to know people. Also, I just really liked the idea that there was an organization that was devoted specifically to and for women in transportation.

"Today, WTS-LA feels very close knit. People are still very supportive. And we continue to do a very good job of reaching out to students. The last workshop I went to with students, we actually had more professionals there than students. So, those students got to meet with professionals on a one-on-one basis, which is incredibly valuable for them. Also, because I'm really just starting out in the industry, I think students can relate to me better than someone who's been in the industry for thirty years or so. When you're an established professional, it's sometimes easy to forget that it's hard for students when they don't have an 'in.' When you join WTS-LA, you automatically get an 'in.' Also, on a more practical level, I gain access to the next generation of promising professional candidates. Mostly, though, I just like helping young people get really excited about transportation as a career path. And WTS-LA does a really good job of keeping things intimate, professional, and supportive."

Doreen Zhao spends a lot of time in the future. But for the many students she works with through WTS-LA, her past provides an important life lesson. In many ways, she serves as a perfect example of exactly how WTS-LA helps women advance in transportation through scholarships, networking, and access.