

## 2018 \$5,000 Build Your Dream WTS-LA Scholarship Winner: Esther Kala



*Esther Kala (2018 \$5,000 Build Your Dream WTS-LA Scholarship Recipient), Photo © John Livzey, 2018*

An undergraduate student at Cal Poly Pomona majoring in civil engineering (transportation), Esther Kala is the first woman in her family to pursue an engineering degree. From the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ms. Kala sees her chosen profession as a calling. “Growing up, I have not only witnessed but also experienced how the ‘inexistence’ of adequate infrastructure can dictate the fate of a people. Congo alone can feed the entire continent of Africa, Europe, the US, and some other countries, yet, because of a lack of adequate roads and railways, her people die of hunger. Indeed, Congo is among the most infrastructural-deficient countries in the world and its few semblance of ‘paved’ roads are in extremely bad condition. As a matter of fact, I remember how my family and I used to drive 10 hours, just to visit with other family members who only lived 70 miles away! This kind of reality shaped in me the desire—at a very young age—to devote my life to a career that would touch civilian’s [sic] lives at the most basic levels.” But her determination met even greater challenges.

Ms. Kala explains that women are strongly discouraged from pursuing engineering in Congo. In fact, the girls-only school she attended didn’t offer the necessary math classes to prepare her for college. So, she attended an all-boys school, facing tremendous resistance and open hostility. But she stayed the course, graduated, and came to the US to attend Cal Poly Pomona, where she plans on pursuing her master’s degree in transportation after finishing her bachelor’s degree. By any measure, her fortitude is extraordinary. But she brings much more to the table as well.

According to Kenneth W. Lamb, PE, PhD, a professor at Cal Poly Pomona, “I have had the pleasure of teaching Esther in our Technical Communications course—a course that is designed to move students outside of their comfort zone and provide opportunities to be vulnerable in public. Throughout the time I had her in my classroom, she was very engaged in the lecture and course discussions and thrived on the most challenging situations. Most of all, what I observed in Esther is a dynamism and charisma that I have seen in only one other student at Cal Poly during the past 7 years as a full-time instructor. I also observed her generosity as she gave of her time to mentor her peers in the course...Esther’s ability to take initiative in a positive way demonstrates her eagerness to learn and grow...I truly believe she is an industry leader.”

For her unyielding dedication to her dream, for her actions in making that dream a reality, and for her commitment to fairness and cooperation, Esther Kala richly deserves to be named the first recipient of the 2018 \$5,000 Build Your Dream WTS-LA Scholarship.