

## Intissar Durham, P.E. may be the most successful P3 in Los Angeles...



*Intissar Durham, PE, Photo © John Livzey, 2018*

She worked for the City of Los Angeles for more than 30 years. And for the past three years, she's served as West Region Aviation Director for T.Y. Lin International (TYLI). Having looked at engineering projects from both sides now, Intissar Durham, P.E. is pretty much her own public-private partnership.

"I was at LAWA (Los Angeles World Airports) for 26 years, but with the City of Los Angeles for over 30. I retired in 2014 with the real intention of becoming a full-time world traveler and grandmother. But it didn't quite work out that way. After decades of going to work every day, the quiet life was not for me. After some time off, I started a job with T.Y. Lin to manage the company's aviation line of business in the west region, where we are now successfully working at airports like LAX and Ontario. The most exciting and challenging aspect so far has been building a local aviation team of multidisciplinary professionals who know airport clients and care deeply about and are responsive to all of their clients' project needs and requirements. That's pretty exciting. But it's also challenging.

"Obviously, this is my first foray into the private sector, so I wasn't sure what to expect. But the most surprising thing was how similar the public and private sectors are. Sometimes the drivers of programs and projects are different, but they are much more similar than I thought they would be. The passion is the same. Everyone wants to do a good project. Whether you're working on the consulting side or the agency side, everyone wants a winning project with innovative solutions, that comes in on time, on schedule, of good quality, and is delivered with a really good team where everyone ends up as lasting friends. That's what struck me the most."

Though surprised by the similarities, Ms. Durham also believes there's tremendous value in sitting on both sides of the project table.

"I think everyone should spend a few years on both the public and private side. Get to learn firsthand what airport challenges are, including schedule pressure, shifting priorities, multiple stakeholders, and an environment that is active 24/7, among others. The private side has its challenges as well. But again, the overarching goals on both sides of the table are virtually the same. Both sides do everything they can to make sure that a project is successful."

In her tenure at LAWA, Ms. Durham held key posts, including being the first female chief airport engineer, a position she held for more than a decade. But again, the advice she has for women and men in leadership positions straddles the public and private sectors.

"We engineers are problem solvers. And I don't think there are bad engineers or bad projects, but at times one finds that project needs are not the best match for the engineer working on it. The art and challenge on either the private or public side to make that perfect match of the right engineer to the right project."

As a female engineer with more than three decades of experience, Ms. Durham also knows quite a bit about working in a profession that was once solely reserved for men. Though she credits LAWA, and now TYLI, for having a supportive and encouraging environment, she also cites another organization for providing critical support.

“I got involved in WTS-LA in the 1990s. I can’t remember how exactly though! I do remember that one of my friends, Susan Collette, an engineer in the Airport Planning Department had been attending WTS-LA meetings and she said it was a great organization that we should join. But at the time, I had a small child and was going to graduate school. So, I kept extracurricular activities to a minimum. Finally, I went to a meeting downtown and I really liked the feel of it and everyone involved that Susan had introduced me to. It was a group where I felt that I belonged, more than any other organization. And that was very important.

“Being a woman engineer and the first female chief airport engineer was hard, despite LAWA being a great working environment with strong women in leadership roles, like Lydia Kennard and Kim Day, who both supported me and WTS. But the support I got from WTS-LA was incredible. They were so generous. I was even named WTS-LA Woman of the Year (2005). Then I got on committees and the board. It made a real difference in both my professional and personal lives. And to this day, I encourage TYLI and LAWA staff to attend meetings and join the chapter, and to be meaningfully involved.

“It’s an excellent networking organization, especially for women engineers, where there were so few before. And it becomes infectious. I got [LAWA Deputy Executive Director] Cynthia Guidry to be involved; and she’s still involved and encouraging the younger generation to be involved. [LAWA Senior Airport Engineer] Rosa Brice is in charge of Awards and Recognition and she used to chair Membership. WTS-LA is an organization that I’m very happy to support and to be involved in, where one meets so many wonderful people who work in every aspect of the transportation industry. And that’s important, because when you work at the airport, it’s very easy to get myopic and only deal with aviation issues and people. WTS is a great place to get out of your bubble and learn what’s going on in all areas of transportation.”