

Tina Backstrom and Sharlane Bailey: Leading the Charge with Transportation YOU



From Left to Right, Sharlane Bailey (Foothill Transit Director of Facilities), Tina Backstrom (LADOT Transit Operations Manager), Photo © John Livzey, 2018

Working on a WTS-LA committee is rarely easy, but it's always rewarding. However, if you think working on a committee is hard, try leading one. And if leading a committee isn't challenging enough, try leading a committee where you must blend local tradition and historical performance with a mandate from WTS International. But that's exactly what LADOT Transit Operations Manager Tina Backstrom and Foothill Transit Director of Facilities Sharlane Bailey are doing as co-chairs of the WTS-LA Transportation YOU Committee.

"We have combined the forces of our rolodexes and pulled together committee members to help realize the initiatives we want to implement. But the program wasn't always about that," explains Ms. Backstrom. "It used to be mostly about the Adopt-A-School program. And there appeared to be varying thoughts on how Adopt-A-School should be handled. Everyone had their own perspective and there was the historical way it was handled. We created a task force to help the figure out what we wanted to work on, what we wanted the program to be, and what initiatives we wanted to advance. That's when we took a look at Transportation YOU."



According to the WTS International website, "Transportation YOU is a hands-on, interactive, mentoring program that offers young girls ages 13-18 an introduction to a wide variety of transportation careers. Through the program, WTS chapters work to make a difference in the lives of young girls by offering programs and activities that will spark their interest in all modes of transportation and encourage them to take courses in math, science, and technology, which are the stepping stones to exciting careers that can change the face of the transportation industry."

Ms. Bailey notes, "Transportation YOU was a natural fit for encompassing what the Adopt-A-School program was all about, plus much more. It still involved going out to all of the schools and talking to young



women, but under the Transportation YOU umbrella it had more of a mentorship aspect to it. So, it was more than going out and visiting with these young women. It was about establishing lasting relationships with the young girls and teaching them what the transportation industry is all about on a more profound and intimate level.”

Both Ms. Backstrom and Ms. Bailey are well suited to the challenge. A longtime member of WTS-LA, Backstrom manages transit operations for LADOT’s Transit Division, specifically the downtown DASH and Mid-Cities DASH programs. She’s also responsible for transit-fleet procurement and research and

development for advancing the fleet. And she’s held numerous positions within WTS-LA, including previous committee leadership.

As Facilities Director for Foothill Transit, Ms. Bailey manages all capital construction projects, facility rehabilitation, and implements a comprehensive and strategic approach to developing, enhancing and sustaining the agency’s physical assets. Originally from Chicago, Ms. Bailey and her family moved to Southern California in 2008. She joined Foothill Transit in 2009 as a project manager, joining WTS-LA soon after. Then, WTS-LA Recognition & Student Outreach vice president and California High-Speed Rail Authority statewide engineering manager Noopur Jain approached her and explained to her the ambitious agenda Ms. Backstrom had planned for the committee.

“Tina was the main person for Transportation YOU,” adds Ms. Bailey. “But there is a lot of work required for this committee. So, Noopur asked me if I would join, and I did. Now with the two of us we have 11 people on the committee. And we need that many people to realize the vision we have.”

But the challenge for both co-chairs rested on blending WTS-LA tradition and objectives with the more formal Transportation YOU mandates from WTS International. But both women saw that fusing as a plus.

“We have adopted the mission of Transportation YOU,” explains Ms. Backstrom. “We didn’t want to lose our history and what we’ve done traditionally. So, we had to incorporate the Transportation YOU program from International with what we’ve been doing. Fortunately, it all meshed very nicely. Though we haven’t formally participated in the program in Washington, DC, we look to include that in next year’s budget. Historically, we felt the cost to send a woman and a girl to Washington could be better used towards scholarships. But now we’re getting a lot more scholarship sponsorship, so we hope to send a girl to DC next year and for her to have that life-changing experience of seeing how things are really done. But there are other benefits from International that we’ve incorporated.

“There’s a group of Transportation YOU coordinators across the US. We have calls and webinars where people present what they’re working on. There’s also a Transportation YOU portal, where you can reach out to other coordinators and run ideas by them. It helps with knowledge transfer and idea exchange. That way, no one reinvents the wheel and we all benefit from everyone’s experience.”

They cite the Girl Scouts as a perfect example. The Transportation YOU program in the WTS Denver chapter started working with the Girl Scouts to introduce transportation to girls in the area. Ms. Backstrom and Ms. Bailey took it a step farther. Working with local scouts, they helped create a Transportation YOU Girl Scout patch to teach them about transportation in depth. The patch requires an educational component along with tours of local agencies like Foothill Transit, Metro, LADOT, Caltrans, and even LAWA. Ms. Backstrom explains the patch’s value.

“It’s a fantastic way to reach girls that age. One of our directors pointed out that we’re always reaching out to the high schoolers, but we never reach down to the younger grades and get them interested when

they're at an even more impressionable age. This is a perfect way for them to realize that being a part of the transportation industry means more than being a bus driver, because that's all they actually see on a daily basis. We're showing them that there's a vast range of occupations within the transportation industry, from being a bus driver to a lawyer to an engineer to an accountant. We want them to discover the idea that you can be anything within transportation."

The co-chairs have a slate of eight initiatives at present. But given their energy, ambition, and sense of purpose, there is always a chance more will develop. Right now, though, their latest focus is on teaching soft skills to girls in underserved neighborhoods. Ms. Backstrom explains.

"We're looking to implement a Girls Empowerment Day. It's like a career day, but we want to take it deeper than that. Our ideas is to help these young women understand what they're going to face in the workplace on a daily basis. It's not just about how to get a job, but also how to function in a job once you have one, how to function in an office. We want to give them awareness and tools. There's a way you dress and a way you present yourself. So, it's definitely about careers, but it's also about empowering them to know what it takes to be successful in a professional capacity. These are the kinds of skills that often don't get passed down to kids, particularly girls, in underserved communities."

If any of this sounds particularly intriguing to any WTS-LA members, both Ms. Backstrom and Ms. Baily have a word of advice.

"Join us," adds Ms. Backstrom. "Participate in Adopt-A-School or any program we're doing. We would love to have you work with us and the girls. We're looking for people to participate in the Empowerment Day, for example, from presenters to mentors. But also, if you have any opportunities through your work, like a paid internship for some of these young ladies, that would also be most helpful. A paid internship for a young girl like this can be a life-changing experience."

Working on a WTS-LA committee is rarely easy. But it is always rewarding. Leading a WTS-LA committee is even harder, but the rewards are that much greater. Tina Backstrom and Sharlane Bailey know that, as they have seen the faces of young girls light up when they discover the opportunities the transportation industry presents to them through Transportation YOU.

Pictured left to right at top: Tina Backstrom (LADOT) and Sharlane Bailey (Foothill Transit)