

## Transportation YOU's Empowerment Day Electrifies Students with Lessons Earned



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Imagine traveling to a new, unknown destination without the benefit of Google Maps, Waze, or a GPS system. Well, for most young women, that's exactly what entering the transportation industry is like, and that's if they know that the transportation industry means more than just driving a bus or a train. So, how does one provide meaningful guidance with real-time updates? Enter WTS-LA's Transportation YOU.

Held on October 12th, at Caltrans District 7 Headquarters in downtown Los Angeles, Empowerment Day was designed to "expose student-participants to multiple routes of professional development for women in the transportation sector" and to "provide participants with key insights for successful access to the field" as well as "skills for navigating the workplace and academia as a woman and how to overcome commonly encountered obstacles." Wow. And to achieve that, Transportation YOU co-chairs Tina Backstrom (LAWA Strategic Planning Manager) and Sharlane Bailey (Foothill Transit Director of Facilities) assembled a stellar group of panelists including KDG Construction President Lydia Kennard, Foothill Transit CFO Michelle Lopes Caldwell, Metro Deputy Executive Officer for Community Relations Yvette Rapose, and LAWA Deputy Executive Director, Planning & Development Group Cynthia Guidry.

"Sharlane and I used the combined forces of our rolodexes to bring this panel together for Empowerment Day," explains Ms. Backstrom. "While Transportation YOU is very much about going out to all of the schools and talking to women, we hold formalized programs like this to reach out to young women we might not reach through school visits. And this is a fantastic way to reach young women at a crucial stage when they're trying to figure out their future, their careers."

"We wanted to make this more than just a typical career day," adds Ms. Bailey. "On a most basic level, we want these young women to know that the transportation industry offers a wide variety of careers, something for everyone. But we also want them to really understand what they're going to face in the workplace. It's not just about how to get a job, but how to function in a job once you have one, how to function in an office. We want to give them awareness and tools. Teach them how to dress and present themselves in a professional context. So, while it's definitely about careers, it's equally about empowering them to know what it takes to succeed in a professional capacity. We're talking about life skills that don't often get passed down to kids in underserved communities."



A full-day program, Empowerment Day welcomed 50 students from Dorsey and Westchester High Schools, and 20 counselors, chaperones, Transportation YOU Committee members Ashlien Savage (Foothill Transit) and Destiny Thomas (LADOT), and WTS members as well. The event began with “icebreakers and introductions,” and then quickly followed with a panel discussion on how each guest speaker entered their field. Then, the students got to grill them on the particulars. After lunch, participants joined rotating group discussions or small breakout groups on a host of topics including Emotional IQ, Managing Microaggressions, Building Friendships and Mentorships, and Transportation Employment Search Best Practices. Then, Ms. Backstrom and Ms. Bailey brought the whole group together to share what they’d learned and award prizes for the most forthcoming. Finally, after an “Interactive Bonding Moment,” they offered closing remarks and dismissed the crowd. But the lessons didn’t end when the day was done.



According to Ms. Backstrom and Ms. Bailey, the wisdom gained by the students was invaluable.

“There were a lot of common threads that were expressed and reinforced by the panel,” explains Ms. Backstrom. “All of the panelists explained how they worked hard, took advantage of opportunities, were open to serendipity—none of them had planned on a transportation career—and that they all ended up doing what they loved. But each speaker also offered up individual wisdom that they developed through their experience. “For example, Michelle Caldwell explained that you never know who is going to change your life forever, and that you should be prepared to do that for others. She also strongly recommended getting a sponsor. That’s different than a mentor. A sponsor is someone who will advocate for you and promote you to others, instead of directly counseling you. Yvette Rapose cautioned the young women that mentors are not there just to compliment you. They also point out blind spots that you need to work on. And she likened each career to a poker game advising each woman to, ‘Be strategic’.

Ms. Bailey adds, “Lydia Kennard explained that no one has one career anymore; everyone has a series of careers. She also cautioned on the dangers of a self-limiting perspective and that nothing, ever, is going to be easy about your career. And Cynthia Guidry added that while mentors and sponsors can open doors for you, the open door is meaningless unless you step up and walk through it. She also reminded the young woman to stay ‘laser focused’ and to treat each task, large or small, with the utmost care and importance. And all of the women advised the students to make a plan with a clear goal, though the plan will most certainly change as life goes on.”

“I think the career advice that these women offered was absolutely extraordinary,” adds Ms. Backstrom. “And the funny thing is that everyone there—guidance counselors, chaperones, WTS members—stayed glued to each and every word the panelists offered. These are definitely lessons you can’t find in any book, so these young women are getting a leg up from some of the most respected leaders in the transportation industry. And that’s exactly what Transportation YOU is all about.”

In today’s world, you’d never venture on a trip with an unknown destination without some form of guidance. For the young women of Dorsey and Westchester High Schools, this is exactly what Tina Backstrom and Sharlane Bailey’s Transportation YOU Empowerment Day was all about.