

## Yvette Rapose: Changing the Course of History One Community at a Time...



*Yvette Rapose, WTS-LA Director at Large and Metro Deputy Executive Officer for Community Relations, Photos © John Livzey*

Preparation is often cited as a key to success. But what happens when you prepare for one challenge and find yourself facing something completely different? That's exactly what happened to Metro Deputy Executive Officer for Community Relations Yvette Rapose.

"Before I got to Metro, I worked for two Los Angeles city councilmembers, Mark Ridley-Thomas and Mike Hernandez. And I had field positions with both of them, but I also got policy experience as Mike Hernandez's legislative deputy. I left for a two-year fellowship at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and then joined Metro in 2000. I started in government relations and then got an opportunity to work with then-CEO Roger Snoble, when Metro was decentralizing its operations. Then I met [former WTS-LA president] Lynda Bybee, who was then the Deputy Executive Officer for Community Relations.

"She asked me if I wanted to come over to Community Relations, and I did. This was 2002. I began by heading up our mitigation program on the Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension project when we started construction. Soon after joining the team, my immediate supervisor went out on medical leave and he didn't come back. So, I was left in the position of heading up the mitigation department for construction—and I had no idea what mitigation or construction really was. I was fairly new to construction and suddenly I was in charge of a department. I didn't really have a blueprint and I was learning construction. Fortunately, I knew community relations. And I also got kind of lucky; no one else knew what a mitigation program was either. So, there was no way I could be wrong. It was a baptism by fire, but it ended up being a really fun experience for me."



Though accurate in fact, Ms. Rapose is modest in the extreme. The mitigation program she created and implemented is now used as a model at Metro and elsewhere, as it can be adapted for virtually any public sector construction project. But her baptism by fire in regards to the mitigation program highlights her grander experience at Metro.

"One of things I appreciate about my tenure at Metro is that I've been provided with the freedom to create and be creative. I'm not an artistic person, but I'm creative. That's made my job so much fun. And that's my legacy here at Metro. But there are two things that happened in my career so far that I'm particularly proud of."

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It had never been done. And whether you call it carmageddon or carpocalypse, one thing was most certain. Closing the 405 Freeway at the Sepulveda Pass presented the perfect nightmare scenario for the person in charge of Community Relations. Enter Ms. Rapose's nightmare.

"We had to close down the nation's busiest freeway interchange, the I-405 and the 101. The impact would be to half a million weekend motorists. And we ended up doing it twice. What non-transportation people didn't understand was that we were shutting down the major access route for major Westside destinations, including UCLA, Getty Center, Skirball Cultural Center, Westwood and LAX (Los Angeles International Airport). The goal was to divert or suppress at least 50% of 500,000 weekend traffic volume in order to minimize the queue on the I-405 to allow for major construction. So, for everyone from the Valley north—Santa Barbara or Bakersfield or anywhere else north—I had to figure out a way to let them know their route south would be closed. Of course, that's in addition to everyone local that uses it, from medical purposes to small business to one-time events. I can't tell you how many nervous brides I had calling me asking for police escorts because their weddings were happening that weekend right smack in the middle of the closure through an active construction zone! But we did our best and we tried to have fun with it. We had over a dozen celebrities tweeting. There was even a race between a JetBlue flight and a cyclist—and the cyclist won! We had some crazy stuff happen that weekend. There was even a baby boom, as Angelenos heeded the call to 'Plan Ahead, Avoid the Area or Stay Home.' In hindsight, it was a lot of fun."

Ms. Rapose's second major work event happened on construction of the Eastside Extension project. And what at first seemed minor ending up having a significant impact on the project, the community, and history.

"We had to widen First Street in front of the Los Angeles County Crematorium. During that process, we found human remains. We halted the project and brought archeologists in immediately. We really took our time to see what we had uncovered. Was it an anomaly? Was there more than one? We had figure out what we were dealing with. And we did.

"There were 128 sets of full or partial remains. And they dated back to the late 1800s, around 1890 or so. Because of some of the other things we found, we also were able to deduce that these were Chinese men and women that had arrived in the late 19th century to help build roads and infrastructure. As the manager of Community Relations, I knew we had to bring the community in and create a plan for the remains. With the remains we also found tea cups and opium pipes and kettles, things we later learned were part of Chinese burial customs at the time. We also learned that at that time Chinese people were discriminated against and excluded from burial at nearby Evergreen cemetery. So, when they died, their community would wrap them in sheets and bury them in this Potters Field. It was all so fascinating and I was honored to participate."

But the story doesn't stop there. Working closely with the Chinese community, Ms. Rapose learned this was a long-lost Chinese cemetery that the community had known about, but had never been able to locate. Although Metro bore no legal obligation to handle the remains in any ceremonial way, Ms. Rapose and Metro felt a moral obligation to do the right thing. And they did.

"This was an opportunity for leadership, for doing the right thing. So, we hired a feng shui consultant who helped us respectfully reinter the remains at nearby Evergreen Cemetery. We found about 128 sets of remains and each set of remains received its own casket. Then Metro purchased enough cemetery plots to reinter them properly and respectfully. Next, we created a huge media blitz to try and find any next of kin, but we couldn't find any. As we were setting this up, though, another surprise occurred.

"We found (only) one set of remains that accompanied its headstone. These belonged to a T.E. Busbee who died in 1882. And then things got even stranger. A retired Metro bus driver that was living in the Midwest, but followed events in Los Angeles, happened to be an amateur genealogist. He had read the paper and saw the Busbee name and it struck a chord in him. He identified a Busbee and contacted them. And it turned out that the woman he had contacted was the great-great-great niece of the gentleman whose remains we had found!

“We had a huge ceremony to reinter all of the remains and built a beautiful memorial that retold the story of their discovery. Dignitaries and the highest ranking local officials along with Metro staff and the community all attended the service. And the Busbee woman also came out and participated in the ceremony, as it was closure for her. It was very honorable and respectful. And it was very rewarding to be able to facilitate this. And I credit Metro for really doing the right thing here. At first, the project was on hold for a couple of months while we dug and identified the remains; that had to be done by hand. But the entire process took about two years! It took a very long time, but it was absolutely worth it. My colleague, Carl Rapaldi (environmental compliance) and I even presented on this at the Transportation Research Board.”

Today, Ms. Rapose marshals the efforts of 60 people divided into four business units in Community Relations. From a liaison function with local governments to community education to their program management group to special projects with Metro CEO Phil Washington, Ms. Rapose and her team cover the vast array of Metro’s projects and public interactions. Despite such considerable responsibility and authority, Ms. Rapose has also recently taken on another role.

“I’ve been a WTS-LA member off and on through the years. I’ve not been all in, so to speak, but that just has to do with time. In addition to my work, I’ve got a four-year old at home. But about two months ago, deputy CEO Stephanie Wiggins asked me if I’d like to serve as a WTS-LA Director-at-Large. She thought it would be a great opportunity for me to do more and to learn more about WTS. And I agreed. So, I’m just now getting back involved and am in the learning phase. I’m excited about being connected to WTS-LA in this way again. I’ve gone to many events throughout the years and I want to get more involved. I really want to see how I can best contribute to the organization, but there is one way that I know I can help.

“Sometimes it astonishes me that I’m in my position. I grew up in northeast LA and I was the youngest of three born to immigrant parents. I didn’t think any of this was in the cards when I was growing up. This wasn’t what little girls like me grew up to be. But it’s something I’m very proud of. Professionally, I feel that I do belong here and that I’ve earned my position. Personally, when I’m driving home or reflecting on it, I always think, ‘How did this happen?’ I’m sure I’m not the only person who feels this way. That’s why with WTS, I’m really looking forward to getting involved in the mentorship program. There are a lot of young women that are trying to find their way and asking whether or not they belong. The answer is a resounding yes, and I want to help show them the way.”