

## Tina Dalili: Improving through Mentorship and Experience



*Tina Dalili (Caltrans transportation engineer), Photos © John Livzey, 2019*

Though relatively new to civil engineering, Caltrans transportation engineer Tina Dalili has already amassed considerable knowledge, wisdom, and experience.

“I was part of the new hiring process at Caltrans directly related to the passage of SB1 (formally known as Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017, a law to repair roads, improve traffic safety, and expand public transit systems across California).

“Right now, I’m in Design Division. My unit mostly deals with projects that are for the State Highway Operation and Protection Program (SHOPP). There are a lot of SHOPP programs going on, but and up until now I was fortunate enough to have two projects assigned to me. One of them is the Stormwater Best Management Practices Project to reduce or eliminate the negative impacts of stormwater runoff, and the other is ADA

Though new to Caltrans, Ms. Dalili already appreciates the value in working at one of the largest, most progressive public agencies in the world. “I feel lucky to be here. The more I develop my connection here, the more I realize how many valuable resources I have for my projects. For example, there are approximately two floors with just transportation engineers who have specialties in different areas. They’re all experts at what they do; hundreds of PEs that I can go to and ask for help or advice. I can use all the resources that we have here to understand what the public wants and to bring them the best solution for their daily obstacles.”



After earning her bachelor’s degree in civil engineering and while studying towards a master’s in structural engineering —both from California State University, Northridge—Ms. Dalili took a job at a firm that designed residential/commercial structures. Though she loved applying her knowledge of structural

engineering, the job quickly became repetitive. She was looking for more and wanted to have more impact on lives. And then, it found her.

“I went to an AECOM-sponsored function for students. And I just started talking to someone who turned out to be a C-suite-level executive. Then I talked to a senior vice president in their water practice. But I had no clue who they were and that was an advantage for me; I treated everyone in the same way and I just tried to be myself without getting intimidated by their title. They were very nice and approachable. That’s what I loved about AECOM. It’s a very professional place with approachable people who are nice and welcoming. The next day I got a job interview, and soon after I started there as a civil engineer in transportation.

“AECOM was a great place to start because they do everything. That was exactly what I was looking for. I was trying to find my place in the civil engineering industry, which has so many subcategories. They wanted to put me in the bridge group because of my structural background, but I wanted to move beyond that, so I moved myself to a Transportation Civil Engineer. I learned that engineering could be extremely innovative and put to great use in helping to improve people’s lives. That was exactly what I had been missing when I was designing residential homes, a way to use my degree and experience to better people’s quality of life through transportation. I’m so thankful to AECOM for that awareness. Joining Caltrans and seeing that equation from the public sector (client side) side helped me determine where I best fit in transportation engineering.”

But another element helped her considerably. At the same time, she started working at AECOM, Ms. Dalili joined WTS-LA. Her membership in the chapter also played a critical role in her finding her place in the transportation industry.

“AECOM has always been very supportive of WTS-LA. The Senior Transportation vice president, Stephen Polechronis, whom I worked for really encouraged involvement in the chapter. So, I went to a program and it was very inspiring. In fact, after that I volunteered for as many events as I could attend. I tried never to miss one. For me WTS-LA is my support system. I can go to the programs and get the best and latest transportation news as well as the best mentors in the transportation industry. In WTS-LA, you can talk to people at all levels of seniority and experience. It’s the perfect combination of being both technical and social, formal and informal.”



But Ms. Dalili found a WTS-LA program to be particularly helpful—the WTS-LA Mentorship Program. Pairing emerging transportation professionals with established, senior-level industry leaders, the WTS-LA Mentorship Program uses a unique brand of alchemy to match mentors and mentees to facilitate the most meaningful professional exchange. And it works, largely because both mentors and mentees take it most seriously. Eric Shen, PE, PTP, the Mid-Pacific Gateway Office Director for the USDOT’s Maritime Administration and an adjunct professor in civil and environmental engineering at USC’s Viterbi School of Engineering served as Ms. Dalili’s mentor. For Mr. Shen, being a mentor was a role that he had honed over the years, one he’d developed a formal philosophy for.

“Being a mentor is about understanding, about spending more time listening rather than talking,” Mr. Shen explains. “I always remind myself that many people want to share their story instead of just get another lecture from someone senior. So, it’s really important to listen to people, to let them tell their story. And when people tell their story, it makes them look at themselves and what they’ve done in a different light. It helps them see themselves more objectively. I’ve learned from many others that mentors are really like Kung Fu masters. Masters are there to help us learn to make small adjustments that lead to profound changes. Ultimately, meaningful improvement and advancement can only come from inside individuals that want to examine themselves and make those kinds of changes. A mentor is there to help them see reality and tweak their path so that they can achieve and learn to get what they want.”

Naturally, in his philosophy the onus is as much on the mentee as it is on the mentor. He believes mentees must approach the relationship genuinely, eagerly, and frankly.

“Mentees must be prepared to open up and be honest with themselves. If they think that simply talking to someone senior will magically confer knowledge and wisdom on them, it won’t be a successful relationship. Mentees should know what they want as much as they can. But it’s also okay if they don’t know what they want, or if they’re confused, stuck, angry, or frustrated with their current situation. But they do need to think about and ask themselves what they hope to gain from the relationship. That’s very important. As a mentee myself, I always look for people that are much wiser than I am. But I have to remind myself that I have to have an agenda within me to help me get to the next level.”

So, how did Mr. Shen perceive Ms. Dalili?

“Tina really struck me from the get-go as someone who is always prepared. Whenever we met she always had well-thought-out questions about career choices and preparation for getting to the next level. Every conversation we had—even though they were very relaxed and informal—she always was prepared. That was very smart. So, I think it was a very productive mentorship and I see her being happier than when we started. I think she’s going to be very successful in this business.”

Grateful for his guidance, Ms. Dalili sees their mentor-mentee relationship much in the same way.

“Eric Shen was a perfect match. As a new engineer, I wanted to be more visible and find a way to add value. That’s the crucial time when you need a mentor. I had so many questions and concerns, but I didn’t know where to direct them. I wanted someone to help me organize my thoughts and put them to better use. And I was extremely lucky to get matched with Eric. I wanted someone who was technical, but who could also talk about networking and the social aspects of work as well as the future. Eric is a natural mentor. He loves networking. He’s extremely accomplished in his career. He’s very well respected. He knows how to perfectly convey information. More importantly, he’s one of the best listeners I’ve ever met. He listened very carefully to everything that I said and then would help me figure things out.

In my opinion my career is my second home. So I will do whatever it takes to make this home my dream home. And that all starts with networking and communication. By doing that I always make sure that I leave a footmark anywhere I go.”

I think everyone should join the mentoring program. Even if you’re uncomfortable, step out of your comfort zone and do it. The program is meant for people like me, people who want more information and need guidance. No matter where you are in your career, go for it.” Make sure to build a reputation and leave a footmark anywhere you work.