

Congratulations to Demi Espinoza, 2020 WTS-LA Back-to-School Scholarship Winner



Demi Espinoza (2020 WTS-LA Back-to-School Scholarship Recipient)

For most, personal experience guides career choice. For a select few, though, who they are and how they were raised transforms them into a champion in a particular space or arena. 2020 WTS-LA Back-to-School Scholarship winner Demi Espinoza is one of those select few.

“My experiences with environmental justice as a Latinx Queer Woman shape my approach to public policy and advocacy. I grew up walking and biking to school under hazardous conditions. I took two buses to get to the nearest park, since there were no direct or safe routes. These early experiences directly and uniquely informed my commitment to building equitable transportation options.

“Professionally, I manage active transportation policies that address and heal built environment inequities. I’ve led policy efforts that address the harmful impacts of industrial pollution in under-resourced neighborhoods with disproportionate impacts on Black, Indigenous and Communities of Color (BIPOC). As the Equity Policy Manager for the Safe Routes Partnership, I’ve partnered with other community-based organizations to advocate against warehouse development near schools based on pedestrian safety and air quality health hazards. I’ve also published a national report on the dangerous land use trends of warehouses near schools, which has been used to leverage relationships with elected officials and the Air Quality Management District...Moreover, I’ve earned a seat on the AB 617 community air quality protection program in unincorporated Muscoy. In this role, I testified for safer streets and parks, in Muscoy, which led to my nomination as a finalist for California Assemblymember District 47’s 2018 Woman of the Year.”

Wow. A master’s degree candidate in Urban Sustainability and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) at Antioch University, Espinoza maintains a 4.0 grade point average and will graduate in May. But she’s also extremely active and dynamic while in school, leading several prominent organizations and garnering numerous awards. The “daughter of working-class Mexican immigrants” and the youngest in a family of 10, Espinoza was raised in Riverside, CA. Still, if there is one descriptor that seems to define Espinoza above all others, it’s trailblazer.

“Ms. Espinoza is a strong leader that is often called upon by policymakers, partners, and other leaders in Southern California to serve on a variety of task forces, steering committees, and working groups,” explains Margo Pedroso, deputy director of the Safe Routes Partnership. “Ms. Espinoza is a respected voice for community engagement and equity, always ensuring that the views of residents in low-income communities and communities of color are at the forefront of the policies for which she advocates...I particularly value Ms. Espinoza’s thoughtful approach to equity and her nuanced understanding of how transportation directly impacts air quality and environment.”

Pedroso continues her praise for Espinoza, noting unique achievements and policy directions attributed directly to her. But Pedroso closes with a more global expression of Espinoza’s value to their organization and the equity and inclusion landscape in Southern California.

“In my view, Ms. Espinoza possesses a rare combination of policy expertise and community engagement acumen. She is able to work with residents to understand their needs, and amplify their voices to push for policy change and funding opportunities focused on people most in need. She instinctively grasps the environmental justice implications of transportation and housing decisions, and is able to effectively advocate for changes that address equity...We need more voices like Ms. Espinoza’s, pushing for a more just approach to communities most in need. She is exactly the type of leader we need in the nonprofit and advocacy world.”

Demi now works for National Parks Conservation Association as a Program Manager. Her Master’s thesis will focus on park accessibility, particularly for BIPOC communities. Her thesis will also be using GIS mapping to highlight transportation options to parks and provide policy recommendation to remedy transportation barriers.

Traditionally, personal experience guides career choice. But for a select few, their experiences and upbringing carve a deeper purpose into their being and a career pretty much chooses them. By all accounts, that’s exactly what happened to Demi Espinoza.