

Intro

Hello, welcome to the InfaTalk Podcast brought to you by Infrastructure Ventures. Come listen in as we talk with policy experts on how we can advance the use of innovative technologies in the infrastructure and transportation industry. Why? Because we know we can do better. So, sit back or walk the dog. Go for a run. Or grab a cup of coffee and join us for this episode of the InfaTalk podcast.

Karyn

Hi, everyone. I am very excited about today's InfaTalk podcast. I am Karyn Le Blanc, CEO of KGL Communications and the communications advisor for InfaTalk America and your guest host for this episode. As we record this today, it is actually International Women's Day and as part of our ongoing Women Leading Innovation and Transportation Infrastructure series, I am so pleased to be sitting here with Sarah Stickler president and CEO of WTS International.

Okay. Well, thank you so much for being here. I'm really excited to talk to you. We've kind of known each other a long time. We've gone back and forth over the years. Obviously, I've watched your career and had my own career in transportation and infrastructure and certainly working with and around women in the industry. I'd love if you would talk a little bit about your background and how you got to WTS and your own journey here. I think women like to hear from other women about how they've reached their accomplishments.

Sara

Yes, and thank you for having me. It's great to be here with you on International Women's Day. I don't have a direct journey into transportation like many of us. You know, the more I learn from our members is that some of us have kind of stumbled into transportation. And that's kind of my journey as well. I'm a former educator, former second grade teacher that left education, kind of joined the nonprofit space.

Worked at the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society for a while, got into policy and then joined associations. So my background really is in associations and was working at an association that did some work within the drunk driving kind of transportation space. And that was kind of my foray into transportation, but really kind of came to WTS from that association background. And, you know, being a former educator, I came from a career field that was full of women.

You know, I could look around. I could see myself as a teacher, as a principal, as a superintendent. I had those female mentors and sponsors. When I came into the association space, not only just transportation, but associations in general. You know, I looked around and I remember going to my first meeting at a new association and walking in and being one of two or three women in a room full of men.

And so, I think, you know, not only was WTS, you know, a growth in the transportation sector for me, but also kind of that that our mission of equity and access for women as well kind of leaving education and leaving those mentors and those sponsors. But I know as I was kind of thinking about this conversation, I was trying to come up with, you know, what is my true transportation story.

And I was thinking back to, you know, as a little kid arguing with my mom that I was old enough to ride my bike to school. And, you know, as a young family, we decided to sell the car and become a transit only family. And but I was really thinking and I wanted to share a story, you know, before my dad would let me get my license.

He made sure that I knew how to change a tire. And somehow, I have been lucky or unlucky enough to have now been the person in situations that is the only one that knows how to change a tire. And I have now changed about a dozen tires, not always my own. And I wanted to share a story.

I was in high school and we were going down to basketball camp. So, there was three caravans of basketball students and there was three coaches, each one driving a van and there was a new JV coach and she was the only female coach and she had been part of the program for two days. And we're driving, you know, down a six lane highway and she gets a flat tire.

And so, we all pull over and we have 15 girls standing on the side of a highway and we're standing there. And it took me a minute to realize no one there knew how to change a tire. And I go up to the two male coaches. I'm like, I know how to do this. I can do this, you know?

And they tell me, Sarah, go stand. You know, go, go, stand away. We'll figure this out. Right? And they kind of get going for a few more minutes. And I finally go back and go, I know how to do this. I can do it. And so, they let me change the tires. We're on the side of the highway.

And here I am with three adults and 15 young girls changing their tire. Well, fast forward six years and my dad calls me and I'm out of college living on my own. And he called me and he goes, Sarah, you're never going to know what's happened tonight. It's like, what happened? And he goes, I was at your sister's basketball banquet, and I sat down and I introduced myself to the couple next to me, and they say, oh, you're Stickler.

Like we know your daughter. He said, oh, I know you know. You know my daughter that plays for your daughter. And it actually was the parents of the coach who was driving the car whose tires blew out. And they said, oh, no, no, no, we don't know your current daughter. We know your oldest. You'll never-- you know, she called us that night.

She, you know, in tears. It was her second day on the job. And your daughter, just like, you know, changed the tire and made it all better. And it was something I will never forget. I think that's the most proud my dad was. But it's funny, you know, he passed away before I was able to kind of enter into the association and transportation space. But I just, I reflected back and I was like, you know, I'm sure in this moment he would find a way to say, you know, it was what he taught me at 16, you know, and changing the tire that that got me here today.

Karyn

Absolutely. And I have to say, a lot of my history emulates — is the same. My father taught me how to change a tire. He taught me how to teach spark plugs back in the day.

Sara

Yeah.

Karyn

You know, I had two older brothers and that I was not going to get away with...

Sara

Nope.

Karyn

...not doing the same type of things. He taught me how to drive a stick because he wanted to make sure I knew how to drive a stick shift. And similar, he passed away about 12 years ago and also did not see me get to do a lot of what I'm doing.

But I do know that if he'd be really — because he was in construction, which made it, that's how I kind of got into this, was I was doing communication and they realized that in transportation and infrastructure projects, you really need to do a lot more communication. And they brought on somebody who would help with that. And that's kind of how I started my foray into it as well a long time ago.

So, but those are great stories. Those are an important stories. I will say one thing, though. You want to go back. You said they let me the two men let me change the tire.

Sara

That is a good point. Yes. [Laughter]

Karyn

No, you got to change the tire.

Sara

No. I got to. That is true.

Karyn

You're the only one who knew how to do it. So that's great. That's really good. And was there something once you got here, did you realize, like, this was a really good fit for you? Do you like transportation and infrastructure? And there's so many, many amazing women in this industry. I just I even know at the TRB recently when we ran into one another, at the event the WTS just did and I was just looking around the room, just floored by how many fantastic, amazing, smart, wickedly smart women that I know that were in that room. It was so great.

Sara

Yes. It can be intimidating. We have a phenomenal membership that is changing the transportation landscape. And it is, I think, coming into WTS. You know, from the association background, it almost felt like coming back home in a way because leaving education, that was a hard adjustment, you know, And I think I was I was someone who thought I was going to be a teacher for life.

I had known since first grade that I was going to be a teacher. I worked at Chucky Cheese Shigh school, too, because I thought that would give me an edge and like I was working with kids. And so when I when I decided to leave education, you know, that was that was a pivotal moment in my career.

And I think, you know, coming to WTS was a little bit like coming home in a way, being able to be surrounded by those type of women and have that support system was something that I was used to in education and had kind of lost a little bit in associations and being in such a male dominated organization.

Karyn

Right. And I think it's a natural fit in an association anyway, because you are educating all the time. I mean, you really everything you do is about educating. Educating your membership and then also educating the larger industry about what this membership is capable of and what we are able to do. Yeah, without a doubt.

So, talking about the industry and as we think more about transportation and certainly as we talk about women and I think particularly as we look to help women, you know, younger women even move into the industry and those types of things, where do you see the largest barrier from attracting women to the transportation industry? And particularly because, you know, the workforce is only we— only need more. And so where do you see maybe those barriers that are still here and existing?

Sara

Yeah, I would say that we're getting better at attracting women and some sectors are better than others. The latest Women in the Workforce report did say that kind of transportation and infrastructure, grouped together, we are close to about 50% women-male gender equity when it comes to that entry level position. But we do know that certain sectors still are male dominated.

And, you know, one of the things that we're working on through our WTS foundation is understanding that we need to get to young girls by the time they've hit sixth grade in order to keep them interested in a STEM related field. And if they don't have that touchpoint, if they can't see themselves advancing or see themselves in a career path by sixth grade, they already at that point start to choose other classes.

They start to choose outside of the STEM. And so, we're working through the foundation to bring kind of new programing to our Transportation YOU, to younger girls getting all the way down in the kindergarten, making sure that they have exposure to transportation type careers, through our chapters, through their transportation new programs, working with schools, working with after school activities.

But I would say I think one of the challenges that we see too, is that reentry and that support for women coming out of the Pandemic. And I think this is something that existed before the Pandemic but was only exacerbated since the Pandemic is that women are taking on more work, just in general, right? At work, at home. Whether it's paid or unpaid work, we're taking on more work.

And at the office, that can be social activities for the company, it can be equity, diversity and inclusion activities and policies even within the organization that are sometimes not paid. And so, it means that women are being pulled from their billable hours or being pulled from their work and they then have to work harder to either catch up or they're not put up for promotion because they don't have as much billable hours. And so, I think one of the things that we're starting to see that we're concerned about is that some women are actually starting to just say, no, I don't want the promotion, I don't want that extra work, I don't want that.

And so that makes us concerned as we think about kind of retention and advancement that: are we in the future going to see that gap at the C suite level and senior management level grow because women are opting out? And I think that for us, as we think about attracting women to the industry, as we think about maybe women making mid-career pivots into transportation, is we have to support them better and that's better policies at the office, that's family friendly policies, it's supporting women where they are. I think we as a society kind of traditionally look at caregivers and say that they can't give as much to their job because they have responsibilities at home.

And I think that we need to kind of shift our mindset some that if you can be at home and managing a family calendar and managing the interactions of getting to school and elderly care and all of that, that you absolutely have a skill set that is valuable on a leadership team. And we need to do a better job of providing policies and providing solutions that kind of meet those women where they are.

Karyn

Yeah, I agree 100%. And I think some of it really has to do with changing the mindset on flexibility. Right, you have to be able to trust that people are going to be able to make up hours or work in a different time schedule or maybe go home for a couple of hours in the afternoon so they can get the kids settled and then return back to work. I mean, there's lots of ways that we can work around these types of obstacles, or issues or whatever. I do it every day. I mean, it's the only way I'm able to do what I'm able to do. And I'm very lucky because I own my firm, so I can make the decisions that I want to make, and I do the same for the women that work in my organization as well.

But I think that other people need to recognize that as well. I think it's just really key in anything that we're going to do moving forward. And so I understand — I liked what you had to say too, about it. Sounds to me like your education background is also playing into you understanding that there's got to be an educational component to the younger people that are coming up, which is going to be very important. So, given the historic funding that's been made through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law now, what are the opportunities do you think that will provide for retaining and attracting women to the industry?

Sara

Tremendous opportunity. I've heard Secretary Buttigieg speak to this, where he has said that his greatest fear is that in this historic investment infrastructure, that we don't do enough, that our single actions don't lead to a big enough advancement in transportation. And so, I think that we have to think big. I think as we think about a trillion dollars being invested in infrastructure, that's hard to even kind of think about, like, what does a trillion dollars look like in these projects? I will say I think this administration has done a great job at building in kind of workforce development and training opportunities into the funds. We know that the bipartisan infrastructure law will provide funding for workforce development and technical assistance. I believe it's close to \$61 million over the next five years for that.

FTA is allowing kind of some flexibility with their formula funds to be used for training activities. So, there is kind of an investment into additional training. I think that for WTS, we see a role for ourselves in attracting the young people to those jobs and making them aware of the fact that there are jobs that will now train you, that this is a career path for you. And it might be through two-year degree, it might be through an apprenticeship program, it might be through a four-year degree, but there are options for you. And I think that's a place that WTS can help our agencies and the private sector as well is getting those opportunities in front of students earlier.

And I think that you raised a good point around kind of that retaining piece of the conversation, is that we need a diverse workforce that will change the delivery of our transportation system, so we deliver for diverse communities. And I think that's something that for WTS we see a place for us with kind of this investment into training and development is to provide that leadership development and to provide, through our partnerships with the private and public sector, to provide that training so that women can continue to advance kind of even after they are able to get the training that might help them become bus operators. But then how do you advance up and become a manager of the bus operators? And so that leadership development is important to us at WTS.

And I know one of the things that we hate to hear is when an employee or employer or a partner come to us and say, well, we look for a diverse candidate, but they didn't exist. And they do. You just have to look differently than you have before or we can help you and partner with you. But they do exist. And you do have those employees on your staff today and they just might be afraid to apply for that job. They may not think they're qualified, or they might just need a little bit of leadership development and additional training to get them there. But they do exist.

Karyn

And I think for women in particular, I do think that is a challenge that oftentimes don't feel like you have the skill set, don't feel like you have the training, don't think I can do it. And I would just say to anybody out there who's listening, you can. I mean, don't be afraid. Really, you should ask. And I was lucky. I worked for the District Department of Transportation for almost a decade.

And I know in the DOTs, a lot of the DOTs, they do have really excellent training programs and they will put people on a path for promotion and help people learn along the way. There's lots of opportunities. It's great to go work for an agency. I loved it so, and it was a wonderful way for me personally. And I think that it's another opportunity for women as well. And then also in the private sector, when they offer those types of opportunities, I think people should, women should definitely step up and take advantage of those.

Sara

And I know, we know that women will wait until they feel like they are 100% qualified for all of those objectives on the job description, right, that they fit all of them. And men will do it when they only feel like they fit 50% of them. And so, we're taking ourselves out of the running, we're taking ourselves out of the game before we even give ourselves a fair shot at it. And so that's something that we work with our programs at WTS is take that chance. The worst that happens is they say no and you're not ready and you try again. And best cases they say, oh yeah, you absolutely meet the same qualifications of the other ten men that have applied for this position.

Karyn

Right, exactly. And then document it.

Sara

Right

Karyn

Document what it is they want you. To do, and then document when you've done it and you get back and you say, I've done all this, now give me another or give me the job.

Sara

Exactly right.

Karyn

Okay. So next I think we want to talk about a little bit about policy. You mentioned that earlier. So how do organizations like WTS International partner with the government, the public side, the federal government, other public agencies, and the private agencies to promote the hiring and advancement of women? And I think you touched a little bit on that just before. But how else are you working along those lines?

Sara

Yeah, we have a couple of different methods and kind of strategies that we use. We work closely with OSDBU, the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization. We've been working with them around their notice for proposed rulemaking. We've brought them to roundtables to be able to listen to women business owners, hear their concerns. We've been able to address that through comments, through letters to that office. One of the things that we're proud of is we're on our way to renewing our long-standing memorandum of cooperation with the USDOT. And we developed that under the Obama administration. And that really formed our Transportation YOU program here at WTS International. And it was meant for young girls. It was meant for that attracting piece and making sure that they had access to STEM related activities.

And that program, as it was implemented, really engaged the regional DOT offices, engaged the Small Business Office — regional offices and allowed us to kind of do programming out at local schools. And so that was a unique way for us to work, although it was through the US Department of Transportation, we were then able to take that program and expand it out into all their regional offices. I think that was a big success for our organization and really launched a big part of our foundation programming. And I would say we work with corporate partners too. And that's the private sector as well, that we're all facing the same challenges.

And when we do something and find a solution or we start to develop best practices, how do we share those and how do we leave it so that the next person isn't reinventing the wheel? And how can we build and expand and understand that we're all working towards the same goals? And I know at times we have competitors and whatnot, but that at the end of the day, the advancement of women, the advancement of a diverse workforce, is something that we can all come together on.

Karyn

And one of the other things I do want to ask, as you talk about all these things, how does WTS International share all the great projects that you're doing? I know that you have a big conference coming up in May, and so what other ways? I mean, there's obviously a lot of ways. So, I'd love for you to tell women how they can find out more about what's happening in the Earth. I mean, we have more questions to go through, but I still think this will be a good point to tell people how they can find more.

Sara

Yes, absolutely. We put on quite a bit of programming throughout the year, that is through our website, WTSinternational.org. Not only do we have that website, but we actually have a member portal that kind of once involved with WTS, we have a lot of different forums and engagement opportunities there for members. We're very big on social media, LinkedIn, Instagram. We've got a great communications department that has really helped us kind of elevate that. And then our monthly newsletter. We put out a monthly newsletter every month that kind of highlights the upcoming activities of WTS International. I would be remiss if I didn't mention our 67 chapters. We have quite a bit. Yes. So, the WTS model, we have about 8500 members across North America.

But under our model, when you join WTS, you get to be part of WTS International and you get to be part of our chapters. That's all included. And so you have a base chapter that you pick which could be where you're located or where your office is. But you get to be involved with all of the chapters. So you can attend any chapter event under that membership. And our chapters put on amazing programming. I mean, if you think about and I know that I think that was one of the things that I was in such awe of when I joined WTS is our 67 chapters are run by volunteers and it's a great opportunity for women to also, and men, to get board experience.

So, if you're someone who hasn't had an opportunity to sit on a board, if you're someone who hasn't had the opportunity to manage a budget, then you could come in as the treasurer of the chapter and manage that budget and get that experience so you can then apply for that next job. But if you think about, we have 67 chapters run by volunteers that are putting on multiple programs a month at times, and I mean, just phenomenal programs that are attracting high level administrators and public and private executives that really do kind of get into the technical side of transportation, but get into the leadership development as well. So, if I was to give any advice about getting involved at WTS, it's to join and then immediately get connected into your WTS chapter.

And that's something we hear all the time when people move and relocate for work, is like that first thing you do is find your WTS network and find that chapter.

Karyn

Yes, absolutely. And I'll give a shout out to the WTS DC chapter because it is a rock star chapter. And as a member and sitting on the executive women's roundtable there as well, it really is a great organization to belong to, and particularly if you're unsure. And as we were saying earlier, women tend to shy away from certain things or they don't want to — they're not sure. It is a wonderful opportunity to get together with other women in the industry at all different levels, and all of whom are willing to talk to you at any level and learn about how to gain a little bit more confidence, how to get a little bit more involved. You know, what it is you might think you're missing that many of us would say you're not at all type of camaraderie that I think you can really find with it.

So, I think 100% agree. I think that your point too, that when you move to different locations, that there's usually a chapter nearby that you can find that's a great is it a great place to meet people that are in the industry that you can get involved in with also. Yeah, there's a lot of really good stuff that happens there.

And so, I think as someone who started their own business just a few years ago and it's growing and I'm excited about it, but there are definitely a lot of challenges as you're doing. And it goes

back to what you said about how much do you say yes to, how much do you say no to, where can you make things work, where can you not.

And then understanding not only the industry, which a lot of people who get into it are already kind of experts in the industry, so that's not the harder part, but the business component of it as well is really difficult. What do you hear from WTS members as maybe the three most challenging, or even the one or two, whichever, that you think about aspects of growing a business, right?

Sara

No, this is a timely conversation because we have a DBE Small Business committee and they put on a women business owners roundtable every year. And were just talking about topics and some of those exact topics of even knowing when to say no to business and if there's clients that aren't paying and when is the right time to say no. And we just recently responded to the notice of proposed rulemaking from the USDOT around some changes to the DBE model. And I think there was kind of three main kind of priorities that came up from the committee. And the first is the transportation industry, so unique in its DBE program and the certifications that come with that.

And that as a small business owner and starting a business, the challenges that you have in getting and maintaining that certification and then wanting to grow, wanting to move into multiple states in the certification process. And we've heard from so many women that are looking to grow that they have to bring on a full-time employee just simply to manage the certifications. And so being able to kind of streamline that process and clean that up and make it attainable for more, I think would be one of the first kind of challenges that we're addressing. The second being the revenue caps for DBEs, and that qualification for being a DBE.

We've heard from many of our women business owners as we look at the mergers and acquisitions that are happening on the larger private firm side, is that the gap between the larger firm and the small business is growing. And so, we need to allow that small business to grow and kind of reach a size that allows it to compete. Because if the DBE program at its kind of peak and success would mean that a woman business owner or minority business owner would graduate out of the program and become a large business. But because that gap is so big, it's almost de-incentivizing them from graduating out of the program because the minute they lose that certification, they can't compete with the big firms anymore.

So, we need to kind of move the revenue cap to allow them to get closer, to compete a little bit better. And then I would say, finally, the third challenge is that succession planning. So, as we talk about small businesses, women business owners, ideally there would become a time when you would want to retire, right? For many of them, that means that they want their firm to

continue on. And as you think about succession planning and building young talent within your company right now, there is kind of a senior level certifying owner requirement. And that the skill set has to be at that senior level to be considered a certified owner.

And so we're working with OSDBU to put together different language that would allow kind of any owner, no matter the seniority, to be considered into your DBE percentage and your social and economically disadvantaged kind of that 51%. And so that way you could provide a young star in your company a few shares and allow them to kind of grow into the role. It's that generational wealth that we're kind of working for and allowing these small businesses to continue on and grow through generations.

Karyn

That's great. You've just hit on all three of my issues.

Sara

Our DBE Small Business Committee is really working to support women business owners of all sizes. I think one of the things that we learned through the pandemic too, is the number of women, and I mean all small businesses, that if you chose to start your business in January of 2020, December of 2019, just how different the world was and your predictions, and then the pandemic hit. And so, understanding, how do we support those women who made that decision and jumped all in, oftentimes with the support of the WTS network. And then the pandemic hit. And so how do we help support them as well? And so, it's business owners of all size.

Karyn

Yeah, that's true. That's true. I kicked off mine in July of 2019.

Sara

So, you are right there. Yes, well, congratulations to you because that is quite an accomplishment.

Karyn

Yes, I'm just very lucky. But I did have a lot of people that I knew and that I could go to and talk to and again can't say enough about it. So, let's talk about education, which I think is one of your favorite subjects at this part. So, you mentioned the foundation program, so let's talk about the WTS Foundation program and tell me a little bit about that.

Sara

Yes, so our foundation is about twelve years old, and it works on scholarship research and education. And that's education—

Karyn

And can I interrupt? Just how old is WTS International?

Sara

We are 45 years old.

Karyn

That's great.

Sara

Yes. So founded in 1977 and a bit of history that I just recently learned is when were founded. So being founded in the 70s, we couldn't be an association because women couldn't have an association. So that is where our S and WTS comes from, is that it's seminar because it had to

be focused around education and training. And I was recently able to talk to some of our founders and they were telling me they used to have the trainings and the workshops at the Army Navy Club here in DC. And at the time women weren't allowed to go through the front door at the Army Navy Club. And so, everyone at going to a WTS event in our first year was going through the back door of the Army Navy Club to hold WTS events.

And so, when we think about there's days obviously where you want to kind of hit your head up against the wall and the lack of progress that we've made. Right. But then you think back and say, okay, well, 45 years ago we were here and that's not that long ago.

Karyn

Oh, I'm sorry, go back to the foundation.

Sara

So, our foundation works toward scholarship research and education and the education piece being kind of students kind of K through postgraduate work. The foundation was really founded out of our scholarship program and through our international and chapter we kind of all come together under the foundation model and on annual basis give close to \$700,000 a year to young women looking to expand their education in transportation. And some incredible women. We were just talking to a scholarship recipient the other day. She's 18, she has her pilot license. She I mean — That is not who I was at 18. I don't know about you, but I was not there at 18. And I mean these women are just, these young women are just doing incredible things.

Our foundation works to support their educational journeys and that could be through trade school and trade colleges and it could be through post — all the way through post doctorate work. And then we also work towards educational programs. I mentioned our Transportation YOU program that is kind of the younger K-12 how do we expose you to different career opportunities? How do we show you what life is like as a bridge inspector? And I think one of the things that we're really focused on now is diversifying the content that there are so many different career paths in transportation. And it can be communications, it can be policy, it can be human resources. It can be finance.

Everyone is needed in the transportation sector. We do still need our engineers and planners, but there is a need for all of those career paths. And you can be in that communications marketing degree and find a place in transportation. And how do we get you into that sooner?

Karyn

Right. Absolutely, and if you find those people let me know and I can...

Sara

Right. And you can hire them.

Karyn

And that's how that works. You mentioned — Did you want to say, too, was there something about the Capital Summit?

Sara

Yes. Our capital summit, thank you, our Capital Summit is coming back after a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic. And so that is a program all of our chapters put on local transportation programming, and then once a year we bring some of those mentees, some of those young girls out to DC for a weeklong kind of transportation camp. This year we're bringing it back as the Capital Summit. We're moving it to the University of Maryland so the kids will get to have an opportunity to stay at a college campus. We'll have a leadership program day ropes course kind of leadership building for the students. And then we're really making this a kind of hands on engagement activity. They'll be traveling all around the DMV area, multimodal. We're going to be visiting the port up in Baltimore Airport, federal highways, going to the USDOT.

But it's an opportunity that through that week, they just get kind of every opportunity within transportation is presented in front of them as a career choice. And they get to meet many of the women located here in the DMV, many of them even coming from areas we take the metro to many of these, and some of them haven't ever ridden public transportation before. And so,

it's a great opportunity. We're revamping it to be a lot more student centric. And we're evaluating that program for years into the future ways that we can expand it and make it regional and offer it throughout the country. Because we know traveling to DC sometimes is hard, but we're really excited to be back in person. We've done it virtually now through the pandemic to try and offer something. But we're really excited to be on a college campus and provide that opportunity. So, it'll be in June of this year.

Karyn

That's great. The hands on experience is really nice. Absolutely. And I will say the WTS DC chapter is Maryland, DC and Northern Virginia as well, although I think there is Maryland chapter.

Sara

Yep, there's a Baltimore chapter. So, it's a fun — I kind of get to go back to my teaching days a little bit. The one that our last one in 2019. You get there, and it's a group of girls that have never met before, and they're all nervous. And we put them in their rooms and we do the bed checks, and I go and knock on their doors. And they're housed with another young student they've never met before. And you get that awkward. And then by the last night, you go and knock on the door and they won't stop talking and they're upset.

And so, it's great that they get that exposure to transportation, but as they exchange numbers and talk about where they want to go to school and maybe they could meet up and it's just great to see them already at 16, 17, 18 years old, starting to develop that network.

Karyn

Absolutely, 100%. And the network really does make a huge difference. Yeah, I was going to say, too, about the young 18-year-old who said she was a pilot. You know, back when were walking in the back doors, women would never think to be a pilot. So, the fact that she is just really, I would just say for women just to continue moving forward and continue to push because it is making a big difference. A big big difference. And so just in closing, let's talk about just a couple of things. Who do you admire and look to as influencers in women in transportation?

Sara

That's a great question. I know there's so many, and I'm going to kind of take an out on this, but there's so many in that you could start at the administration. You could start at Deputy Secretary Polly Trottenberg, who's a huge supporter of WTS all the way through the administration. I mean, Maria Fernandez, Robin Hutchinson, our administrator. This is an administration that not only kind of walks the walk — but talks the talks and walks the walk is they have a very diverse leadership team and team all the way down to our membership. I mean, our WTS International Board has a phenomenal group of women agency CEOs, senior level executives. So, it's hard to pick one. And I was trying to figure out how to pick one without getting into trouble.

I would be remiss too if I didn't mention our chair right now, Janet Walker Ford. She is phenomenal and she is in our 45-year history, she is the first Black chair of WTS International. And with that she's brought new energy and new focus for us with priorities around advocacy work and our diversity program. But I would say I think one of the things with all of these women is — that inspires me is their willingness to not say I have a seat at the table and therefore I'm the woman at this table. They are all so willing to say we need more women and we're going to help them bring that seat. And I think that's something at WTS, we talk a lot about the difference between sponsorship and mentorship.

And women are really good at asking for mentors and mentors will give you advice and help you. But men are better asking — they're better at asking for sponsors. And that's someone who's going to go and make that call and say, hey, I have a candidate for you whether you're hiring or not, you need to talk to this person because you need them on your team. And there's that person who's going to advocate for you when you're not in the room. And that's something that I think as I look at our WTS members, is that we have started to shift that conversation and there are just so many phenomenal women who are now becoming those sponsors. And I think we're changing the environment and we're changing the game by doing that.

Karyn

Yeah. Lead by example.

Sara

Lead by example.

Karyn

And I do agree with you, too, that they are looking to bring people along with them. And if people feel like they're not ready for that, they're going to teach you how to get yourself ready to take on that role.

Sara

Yep.

Karyn

I feel that there really is a sense that people want to see everybody succeed. There's enough for everybody. Like let's all kind of get in here together and just figure out how we can help one another.

Sara

Right.

Karyn

Yeah, I love that. I think that's great. And so, we'll close out, though. Tell me about and I think we mentioned a little bit about the event in May, but what are your upcoming future events and programs? Give a little plug for WTS.

Sara

Yes, no, thank you. Thank you. We have our Policy Symposium, which is actually happening next week in Washington DC. This is part of us re-engaging, our advocacy arm of the organization. We'll be announcing a legislative agenda later this year, something that we haven't had for the last few years. We'll be focused in not only on transportation policy, but also on as we think

about women's rights, equal pay, as we think about family friendly policies, those types of things. So, we're excited to bring back the Policy Symposium. We have our annual meeting in May, which will be in Atlanta, Georgia this year. We're excited to have the great intersection transportation and equity down in Atlanta celebrating our 45th anniversary. We have the Capital Summit, which we mentioned.

And then this fall we'll have our Signature Leadership Program, which has a mid-career cohort and an executive cohort, and is a kind of weeklong program focused on your personal leadership, career development and personal development as well. And then I wanted to mention this year we're bringing some new programming. We have a distinguished speaker series. We heard from Dr. Mia Bay in February. She's an author and professor who wrote *Traveling While Black* and so she shared some of her research with us in February. And we just had today, Missy Cummings, who was celebrating International Women's Month. But we were talking about kind of automation and innovation within transportation. And her, as one of the first female fighter pilots at the US navy was great to hear her experience.

We've got more of those coming this year and we're trying to bring new voices and new experience to WTS and are excited about being able to share that not only through the speaker series, but at our conference and at future events.

Karyn

Right, super. And then your website?

Sara

And then our website, WTSinternational.org. That is where you can find all of that information and dates and follow us on social. And LinkedIn, I would say number one is WTS International and then same for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Karyn

Super. Sara, thank you so much. This has been awesome.

Sara

Thank you.

Karyn

Great conversation.

Sara

Yes.

Outro

Thank you for listening to this episode of The InfraTalk Podcast. We hope this discussion inspires you to ask your own questions and encourages you to have discussions with policymakers and your peers. If you want to know more about InfraTalk America, visit us at Infratalkamerica.com, follow us on social media @InfraTalkUSA or subscribe to The InfraTalk Podcast on your favorite listening platform to be notified of all new episodes and features. And remember, every innovation starts with a conversation. So, let's start talking.