

# Navigating a New Path: From Armenian Roots to Transit Routes

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“You must make a choice to take a chance, or your life will never change.” These words from motivational speaker Zig Zigler have stuck with me as the 3 C’s of Life: Choices, Chances, Changes, and I have used them to guide me through endless transitions in my life, including one of the most challenging and exciting—the one into the transportation industry.



*Marina, second from the right, and her team at VTA receiving Adwheel Awards from APTA.*

I began my career as a case manager for at-risk youth, transitioned to public safety with the City of San José, and—just in the last two years—have found myself at the [Valley Transportation Authority](#) (VTA) as part of a team earning [awards](#) from the [American Public Transportation Association](#) (APTA) for our agency’s work in communications. When I trace my career path through public service to the world of transportation, I follow so many unseen connections, all woven through with the universal thread of community.

Sometimes the face of community comes in the form of a black dog named Tex. That was the case in a collaboration I led last year between VTA and the Santa Clara County Office of the Sheriff Transit Patrol. A video we shared on social media [introducing explosives-sniffing canine Tex](#) set to trending music increased VTA’s social media reach by 440% and led to a 450% increase in downloads of the VTAAlerts safety app as well as an increase in the app’s use. The initiative, Promoting Safety is Taking on a Whole New Image for VTA, fostered trust with riders and ultimately earned recognition from APTA. The experience was personally and professionally rewarding to be able to help our agency connect with the riders and the larger community.

Success in communication isn’t always measured in traditional ways, especially when connecting our community both internally and externally. The distribution of [Taylor Swift-themed custom VTA friendship bracelets](#) is a perfect example. By partnering with Bohemian Moon Art, a local small business I had worked with at a previous employer, we created and distributed these bracelets at light rail stations to riders and staff. [This initiative was not just about the bracelets](#); it showcased how



Marina and VTA team distributed custom VTA friendship bracelets to light rail riders.

thoughtful, creative communication can bridge gaps and foster a sense of belonging. The project boosted VTA's social media presence, increased internal engagement, and attracted widespread media coverage. This collaboration with our marketing team highlights how communication can strengthen ties within our organization and the broader community.

Today, one of my major roles is leading internal communication efforts, building up and supporting our community within VTA and the industry more broadly. Our agency's award for "[Holding on to Our VTA Employees](#)" focused on [workforce development and retention](#), a critical topic many transit agencies are currently grappling with at

multiple levels. Internal communications is a cornerstone of our responsibility that we must never overlook. Through initiatives like these—coupled with growing trust between front line workers and our communications team—we continue to build bridges, reinforcing the idea that internal and external communications are crucial to our success and retention efforts. Things work best for everyone when you extend a hand first and move through the world with a genuine passion to do good.

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That is what I learned even before I began any sort of career, growing up with the backdrop of Armenian culture. It is an oft-uttered adage from Middle Eastern moms to “never show up to someone’s home empty-handed.” This phrase, for me, has become a philosophy of hospitality from the heart. **VTA isn’t just getting from A to B. It’s everywhere**—in the heart and limbs of the community, as it should be, and I work hard to go forth into the community always with the joy, mentorship, and warm welcome that brought me to where I am today.

When I first moved to VTA, I was concerned my skills wouldn't translate. If I didn't know the ins and outs of a bus's mechanics, was I meant to be a part of the transportation industry? As an Armenian woman with a seemingly unrelated background, how would I find my place in this industry? The reality emerged that community engagement, public service, and communication are universal. My skills allowed me to innovate and excel in my position much quicker than I once anticipated. Each role I've held has been a stepping stone, contributing to my current





success. It's about recognizing the value in every experience and understanding how it shapes your future.

This truth hit home with an enormously successful groundbreaking event for the [Eastridge to BART Regional Connector](#) (EBRC). My contributions to the event included using my community connections with performers from underserved areas to highlight the work being done to build up youth and families in East San Jose. It was also among my responsibilities to pitch news coverage of the event, which encouraged the community groups who received the attention. Being a woman and Armenian in transportation, I have sometimes felt unique. But rather than seeing it as a barrier, I use it as a bridge, along with my background and skillset to connect with others who may also feel underrepresented. No matter the industry or event, we can lift up each others' voices.

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That was the case in one of my favorite moments so far working in transportation: hosting the [Mineta Summer Transportation Institute](#) field trip and graduation. As I stood before the bright faces of our graduates for the second consecutive year, I couldn't help but reflect on my own journey. Seeing their excitement reminded me of my own beginnings in transportation, a field I entered almost by chance but stay in by choice. Having the opportunity to speak to these students has become one of the most fulfilling aspects of my career. Guiding them through the complexities

of transportation, sharing my thoughts on the journey of life, and most importantly building them up to believe in themselves every step of the way. I see the importance of community and the impact one person can have in shaping the future through connection and conversation.

### About the Author



[Marina Chakmakjian](#) is Valley Transportation Authority's Communications and Media Spokesperson. She earned multiple 2024 APTA AdWheel awards for her impactful initiatives, engaging communications and social media campaigns. Prior to joining VTA, Marina earned the City Employee of the Year Award by the San José City Council, the California Crime Prevention Officers' Association Award of Excellence, and the SJPD Bureau of Field Operations Excellence Award for National Night Out and community engagement. Marina is a woman of action. She is distinguished by her ability to convey key messages, foster relationships, leverage multimedia platforms to engage with diverse groups, and serve as a trusted transit spokesperson, bridging communication between the community, colleagues, and stakeholders.