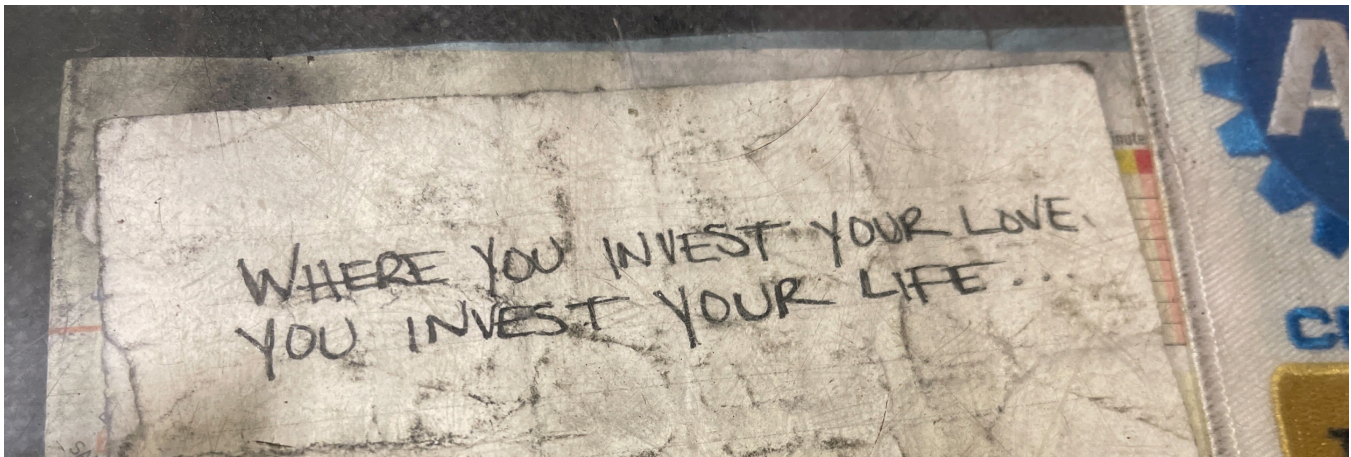


Where You Invest Your Love: A Journey of Connection and Service at LA Metro

Calvin Wong

Maintenance Specialist Leader, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro)

Tucked inside my toolbox is a small scrap of graying wrinkled paper. It greets me every evening when I start my shift at night, when most shifts are just ending. This little piece of paper with a few words scribbled on it is a token of another shift more than a decade ago, long before I became Maintenance Specialist Leader—back when I was a part of the team tasked with sanitizing the LA Metro Bus Fleet in Canoga Park.



More than twelve years ago, a friend of mine pitched working at LA Metro to me by emphasizing the benefits and pensions that came with working for a major transit agency. I had no knowledge of working in transportation, and at the time, I just wanted a job that paid more than minimum wage. The first time I applied to work in maintenance with Metro, I was turned down. Stubborn and determined, I figured out how to better market myself and applied again some time later. Soon enough, I started working as a Service Attendant cleaning buses and taking classes in the hopes of becoming a mechanic. In that year and a half as a Service Attendant, I cleaned food, grime, and vomit on the bus, really getting into the grit of my community, and that is still an important job someone has to do. I worked my way from scrubbing vehicles to a bus mechanic and then to the shop foreman at light rail. Now, I help to oversee the train repairs that run from downtown Santa Monica to downtown Los Angeles.



Part of that journey was studying, applying, studying, and then applying again. The Master of Transportation Management [program](#) at [San José State University](#) propelled my career and gave me invaluable insight into the big picture of the industry and the state of transit in LA, in California, and worldwide. The experiences in the program bridged my understanding of that frontline mindset to upper management, and networking with people from other backgrounds enabled me to understand interdepartmental and interdisciplinary collaboration in new ways. I take that experience with me into my day-to-day operations.

Every day in the shop, my team and I manage train maintenance, prioritizing tasks and ensuring that all the essential repairs are completed to keep transit running smoothly from LA to Santa Monica. Since I work the night shift, I am part of the team assessing and prioritizing which trains need maintenance and coordinating the daily rollout to guarantee that the required number of cars are available for service each morning. When a car is out of service, it limits our ability to meet community needs.

The essentiality of my team became especially clear to me, and to many others, during the pandemic. Trains keep going to keep people going. Without trains, the people we rely on to keep our own lives running (like nurses, grocery store clerks, and first responders) cannot get to work. Even though maintenance techs are behind the scenes most of the time in the shop, it's important to understand the impact the work of our team has on the system and on the community.

Sometimes, a real challenge arises when we are called out into the field. Unlike a bus that can pull over out of the way of traffic, a train that needs maintenance is stopped directly on the tracks. These situations turn high-pressure quickly when you have minutes to get the train functional again. In these situations, patrons are sometimes understandably frustrated, so quick, accurate responses are crucial. Fortunately, these high-pressure situations suit my personality; they are puzzles to solve. When we're repairing vehicles in the shop or in the field, we focus on taking pressure off the operators (who have increasingly faced assault and harassment) and getting the system up and running again to keep *the community* running.

When I was about eight years old, I took apart my dad's stereo system. I wanted to get my hands on the pieces and examine each of them. As a kid, I never did get the system back together. Now, so many

years later, I think of that moment as one that would have benefitted from collaboration, from connection. Even though I was taking something apart, I was trying to build connection because I wanted to see how everything fit together. All of us at LA Metro, in our city, and in our broader communities all fit together and work together to support and lift up each other.

At LA Metro, I served on the [Women and Girls' Council](#) to advocate for initiatives that welcome and encourage more women to join the transportation industry. As the more experienced professionals retire, we need to fill the workforce shortage with capable, diverse people, and that means making sure women have equal opportunities. I also am grateful to volunteer for the [SEED School of Los Angeles County](#), a unique college-prep public boarding school that provides students from diverse backgrounds with a path to college and careers by engaging them in computer sciences, engineering, and studies of systems and societies through transportation infrastructure. My experience engaging with these kids broadens my horizons and refreshes my perspective whenever I hear their brilliant questions. When I was part of the inaugural leadership academy at LA Metro, I had some amazing mentors, and I hope I can guide these students at SEED LA and be an inspiration to them in the same way.

Currently, I'm a part of a [Lead LA Fellowship](#) cohort, continuing to build new skills and connections. Every night at work, when most people are asleep, I am working hard with my team to maintain the vehicles and systems that keep LA running and get everyone where they need to be. Everywhere I look, all of us are building community. The connections might seem small at first, but you never know where a seemingly small act might take you. Maybe listening to a friend will shape your career. Maybe making a new friend will send you to Japan. Maybe a tiny scrap of paper left on a bus will echo an important sentiment to a maintenance lead you never even met every time he looks inside his toolbox and reads the words written over a decade ago: "Where you invest your love, you invest your life."



About the Author

Calvin Wong is a Maintenance Specialist Leader at Los Angeles Metro, where he has worked for more than a decade. Calvin began as a Service Attendant in 2012 and now helps lead a team that keeps the trains running between downtown LA and Santa Monica. Calvin is part of the competitively selected Coro Southern California Lead LA 7 cohort, a leadership development program for professionals from across the greater Los Angeles region. He is a graduate of the Master of Science in Transportation Management from San José State University. He continues to look for opportunities to do good in his community and contribute to the public transportation industry.