

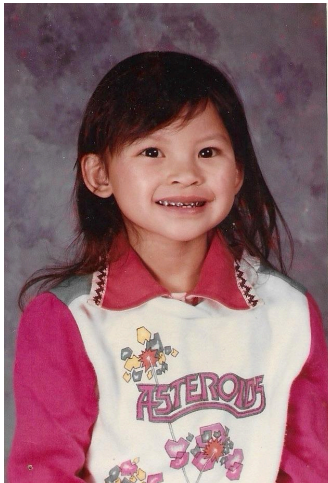


How a Transportation Geek Found Her Power—and Is Passing It On

Lacy Vong

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Three words come to mind when I reflect on my career journey: **sacrifice, opportunity, and grit.** Today, I feel fortunate to have landed at a place in my career with a job that feels like a dream. As Operations Manager at employee-owned transportation infrastructure firm [HNTB](#), I get to live my dream of being paid to be a “transportation geek” alongside some of the most talented engineers, planners, data analysts, tolling experts, grant specialists, and financial analysts in our four offices in Northern California and Nevada. It has been a journey getting here in my career and another, perhaps even more arduous, journey to arrive at a place where I feel comfortable sharing my story as an immigrant, a woman in transportation, and someone who wants above all else to pay forward the opportunities that have empowered me to become who I am today.



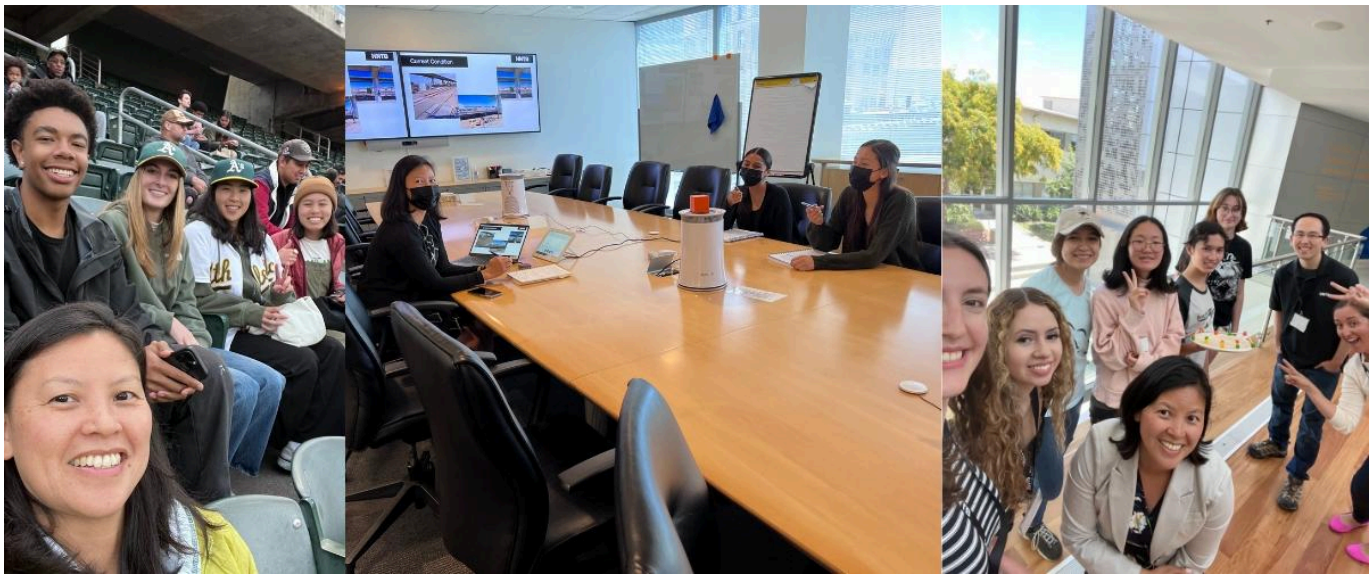
As a kid, I did not know what I wanted to do with my life and did not have many role models for inspiration. My family is Chinese, and we came through Vietnam to the United States as refugees after the war ended. My parents sacrificed everything they had to secure passage for our family so their children could have opportunities that they didn't have. Starting from scratch and with nothing, we settled in Pittsburgh, PA, where I have early memories of riding two buses with my mom and siblings to bring home the few groceries we could afford. In school, I was always good at math, logic puzzles, and solving problems, and was lucky to have teachers see my talents to open doors for me to take advanced classes and specialized programs. However, even after college, I was still unsure how those talents could help me get a job or what I wanted out of life. Then 9/11 happened. Living in New York City at the time, I felt the world shift.

The terror of that day was a wake up call: ***I have but one life; what am I going to do with it?*** It was time to start fulfilling my parent's hopes and dreams for us and not squander away the opportunities afforded to me by being in America.

I decided to go back to school in Pittsburgh to get my master's degree in public policy and management and through first-hand experience, found public transit hadn't improved since I was a kid. Once again, I found myself taking multiple buses and trudging through the snow to have the bus not show up and then miss class or even worse be late for work. I wanted better for my city. I wanted better for my community. If a city of more than a million people does not have efficient, accessible transportation, what is it like elsewhere? Transit means getting to work, to school, to medical appointments, to the grocery store. Every American deserves to have safe and reliable means to

access opportunity. This realization led me to an internship at the Department of Transportation, and I seized on this opportunity and the energy to make a difference, advancing my career and giving back wherever I could. I worked as a Community Planner for the Federal Transit Administration, as a Senior Policy Analyst, and later as Assistant Director of Field Operations for the U.S. Government Accountability Office in Oakland. I am very proud of what I was able to accomplish as a federal employee for nearly 15 years and grateful to the supervisors, mentors, and peers, who helped me along the way.

“As I learn to embrace and share my story, I hold the door open for both formal and informal connections, and I encourage others to do the same.”



Lacy has been inspiring young people to become transportation geeks through (left) HNTB summer internship, (center) Girls Inc. of Alameda County high school internship, and (right) Mineta Summer Transportation Institute programs.

In 2019, I had already achieved more than my 6-year-old self could have even imagined, but I didn't quite feel whole, something still felt missing. That year, after graduating from the [Coro Northern California's Women in Leadership Program](#), I was asked to be interviewed by Coro's Federal Leadership Program fall class to share my experiences as a leader. I felt honored but embarrassed as I did not see myself as a leader and thought I didn't have anything of value to share. It was the first time I felt brave enough to share my immigrant story and how I felt I always had to work twice as hard as my peers to be recognized for my achievements. Later, I learned that the class said it was the most inspiring interview of the entire program and several participants, from the US Immigration & Customs Enforcement, reached to ask me to speak at their agency during a Lunch and Learn session, which then led to the organizer asking me to be her mentor. Not too long ago, the [WTS San Francisco Bay Area Chapter](#) reached out to me about a mentorship opportunity and I expressed excitement about being connected with a mentor. Surprise—I was being asked to be the mentor. Both of these experiences empowered me to recognize how far I have come, how much I have to

give back. I have mentored women by helping them move up through their careers, supporting them to increase confidence in their own abilities, and ultimately get promoted. These experiences are invaluable, and I know I am a more capable leader because of them. As I learn to embrace and share my story, I hold the door open for both formal and informal connections, and I encourage others to do the same. Take advantage of opportunities; let people lift you up as you lift them up. If someone reaches out, say “YES.”

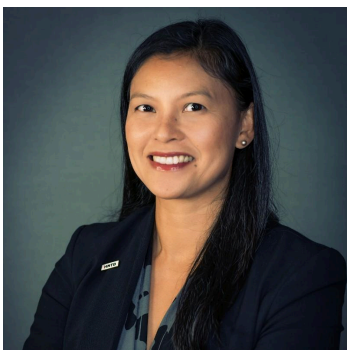
The most fulfilling part of my role at HNTB is the people. Recruiting, mentoring, building community, helping the next generation—inspiring young people to become transportation geeks like me—all of that brings me joy. I am fortunate that my office is able to invest in programs and partnerships with MTI, WTS, and others where we can expose young people to the industry and to outstanding leaders, including MTI’s Executive Director [Dr. Karen Philbrick](#). What pushes me is recalling not having exposure to women and people who looked like me as a kid to dream big. By meeting me and Dr. Philbrick and others, young girls can see themselves as leaders and craft their own plans to advance their goals and make a difference in the world.

“... be brave, be bold, and be fearless.”

I was recently asked about a moment or project in my career that I am most proud of. There are many, but I go back to my early humble days when I first started to connect my talents with my values. As an intern with the Federal Transit Administration more than two decades ago, I helped with the United We Ride initiative which aimed at improving the availability, quality, and efficient delivery of transportation services for older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals with lower incomes. It was the first time that I felt connected to my work and my work was making a difference in my community. I feel lucky to be able to support and partner with public transportation agencies today to provide improved transportation choices to communities.

To those who are now where I once was, I say, be brave, be bold, and be fearless. It will feel scary, but do what your gut tells you to do, and everything will be okay.

About the Author



[Lacy Vong](#) is a transportation geek and Operations Manager at HNTB. She supports the strategic vision for the firm’s hiring and recruiting plan, manages engagement activities for employees and the communities HNTB serves, and oversees internal operations processes to empower HNTB to deliver innovative transportation solutions to support thriving communities. She has completed both the Coro Northern California Women in Leadership Program and the Women’s Leadership Program for Senior and Executive Leaders from WTS International. She has an MS in Public Policy & Management from Carnegie Mellon University. Lacy gives back by volunteering with WTS San Francisco Bay Area, Fred Finch Youth & Family Services, and Girls Inc. of Alameda County.