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During Women's History Month we highlight the contributions women have made to our society, improving the quality of everyday life. From innovators to entrepreneurs, businesswomen to teachers, scientists to authors, homemakers to architects, and everything in between, we owe a great deal to women who are leaving a mark in the world.

From the women who might first come to mind – like Bessie Coleman, Amelia Earhart or Rosa Parks – to lesser-known ones – like Mary Riggins who invented the railway crossing gate, or Olive Dennis who introduced reclining seats and stain-resistant materials on trains – women are no strangers to the world of transportation.

When it comes to women in transportation today, the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported that women make up only 24% of the transportation workforce (2020 Census data), despite estimates they make up more than half of all transit riders. However, there is reason to be encouraged. As of just a few years ago, reports showed that just seven of the top 40 transit leaders were women. Today? Nearly half (12) of the top 25 transit agencies in the US are led by female CEOs and General Managers, including right here at MTS.

While there is still work to be done to increase female representation in transportation, there are many helping advance the industry and paving the way for more women to be successful leaders now and in the future. This International Women's Day and Women's History Month, we'd like you to meet some of the women that are making that happen day in and day out at MTS.

**Sharon Cooney – CEO**



When Sharon was named CEO in the spring of 2020, she was the first woman to take the title at MTS in its history. Now, not only is Sharon leading the transportation landscape in San Diego, but she was also named Chair of the California Transit Association (CTA) earlier in 2024, providing critical policy direction and advocacy for transit agencies across the state.

While she's climbed the ranks to lead one of the largest transit agencies in the country, her motivation started back in childhood, in her own home:

*“She was the first in her family to go to college. She worked two jobs as a nurse right out of school. She was never afraid to follow her passion. She eventually left the workforce to care for her seven children, full time. Much of her time was spent shuttling us to school and sports – she believed that education would be the key to our success and happiness. One thing she told me as a teenager that has always stuck with me is that you can’t live your life always looking to a future goal, you need to live in the present and enjoy today. She was also never afraid to change paths, and once her children were grown enough, she re-entered the workforce for a new career she loved.”*

Now as CEO, she hopes to pave a path for more women leaders, “I want to make it easier for women to see themselves in leadership roles, and to give them the tools and assistance to get there. I want to remove whatever barriers they face to achieve their dreams.”

## **Beverly Neff – Senior Transportation Planner**

Beverly Neff has been with MTS and in public transit for 17 years, and joined the planning team six years ago, now serving as the Senior Transportation Planner. Beverly oversees planning for many of the region's busiest bus routes, covering the South Bay service area.

When asked about her vision for the future of women in transit leadership roles Beverly said:

*“It is so important to have women in transit, because women bring a different perspective to the transit experience. How and why women travel is often largely influenced by their disproportionate share of childcare and domestic responsibilities. Paired with real and perceived concerns regarding safety/security, it is critical to have women in transit who can identify with these issues and work to resolve them. Women in leadership roles are not only important to push gender-informed policies for the benefit of transit riders, but also to promote a healthy work/life balance for transit employees.”*



## **Fabeann Soberg – System Safety Manager**



Fabeann has been with MTS for 13 years and recently took on the role of System Safety Manager, Rail Division. She oversees safety on our rail track and ensures we have a safe environment for passengers and operators on our Trolley system (a role she is well suited for, given she started her career at MTS as a train operator herself).

Fabeann has many fond memories of working in public transit, and shares her most cherished one that inspired her to pursue a leadership role:

*“My favorite memory comes from my qualification training to become a Train Operator. The Training Supervisor at the time, Dave Bagley, told me that he saw me in Supervision two weeks into training. That comment and his belief in me early in my career helped me pursue multiple supervisory positions, which led me to ultimately become his successor as the System Safety Manager of Rail.”*

## **Johanna Paynita – Service Desk Supervisor**

Johanna, or JoJo as she’s known to us, is one of our veteran leaders at MTS, having 12 years of



experience under her belt. JoJo works on our Information Technology team, another traditionally male-dominated field. Last year, JoJo overtook management of the MTS Service Desk, aka the team that helps keep everyone else running.

As JoJo gets ready to celebrate International Women's Day, she wanted to share a few words with other women in public transit or looking for a career in the industry:

*"Women starting their careers should believe in themselves and their abilities. Setting objectives, working hard, and seeking opportunities for growth and development are all vital. Building a strong network of mentors and supporters can also help them navigate the problems and possibilities that come with a career. Maintaining a positive attitude, being resilient in the face of adversity, and staying true to one's principles can all contribute to long-term success."*

When thinking of how to help women achieve higher levels of success in their transit careers, JoJo says:

*"We can organize career workshops and seminars, encourage mentorship programs, and highlight and honor the accomplishments of women in transit and related fields. This can motivate more women to consider the opportunities in transit and related fields and feel supported in pursuing them."*



## Kena M. Teon – Grants Administrator



Kena has a long history with public transit (more than two decades), including 17 years here at MTS. Three years ago, she was promoted to Grants Administrator, responsible for helping the agency secure funding to advance system improvements.

With an extensive base of knowledge of building a career in public transit, Kena speaks to the importance of finding purpose in your role, whatever it may be:

*“No matter the task — whether it’s cleaning a bus, conducting software updates, managing invoices, or leading a team of 200—your level of fulfillment directly impacts the outcome of your work. When you find a role within the transit industry that truly fulfills you, you’ll naturally strive for success. You’ll not only want to succeed individually, but also to see your team and employer succeed. Together, you can make a meaningful impact on the lives of the public, which is the ultimate goal. So, prioritize finding a role that fulfills you in order to ensure success.”*

In addition to her work at MTS, Kena is actively involved in Women in Transportation (WTS), a national organization dedicated to recruiting and growing women’s role in the transportation

industry.

*“My vision for the future of Women in Transit is centered on achieving equality. This means ensuring that women have access to equal opportunities, receive equal pay for equal work, and are treated with fairness and respect. Ultimately, it is incumbent upon us as women to drive this change and deliver on these principles of equality.”*

## **Marissa Rodriguez – Manager of PRONTO & Passenger Support**

While Marissa only recently joined the ranks of women in public transit and MTS (only 7 months ago!), she displays a passion to help other women make a career in the industry.

Marissa thinks it's important to have a source of inspiration and she shares some of tips for women aspiring to be leaders:

*“I would recommend to other women who aspire to get into leadership positions the following:*

- *Believe in yourself and find a community of mentors and teammates who believe in you and genuinely care about you.*
- *Invest in yourself, be a student. Take the step of reading more books, ask your managers and teammates for feedback (for example, how can you improve/what are your strengths/etc.), and take advantage of self-improvement courses, there are so many resources today!*
- *Speak out and provide feedback, leadership is about maintaining your presence and having valuable feedback that contributes to the organization and department. Allow your feedback to challenge the way things are typically done.*
- *Lastly, don't be afraid to put yourself out there, share your ideas, voice your opinion, and be comfortable with being uncomfortable.”*



**Regina Tachiquin – Transit Store Supervisor**





Regina has been with the agency for eight years, quickly climbing from an Information and Trip Planning Clerk through three different supervisory and management roles – the most recent promotion coming three months ago. As the Transit Store Supervisor, she oversees a team of seven who are often the face of MTS to many riders.

Regina shares some powerful words of inspiration to women who are still early in their career in transit:

*“Never be afraid of stepping outside of your comfort zone. It is the best way to grow and expand your experience. If you are not sure about something, ask questions.”*

A huge thank you to these women, and the more than 300 women representing MTS every day. If you’re interested in joining the transportation industry, **[check out our careers page](#)** to learn if a role in transit is right for you.

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