Path to Outstanding Industry Contributor: The Julie Dunbar Story

It was freezing cold outside, but lively and warm inside Busboys and Poets during Zephyr’s Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting Reception on January 15th. A round of applause ensued as Julie Dunbar, president of Dunbar Transportation Consulting, stood up to receive the first ever Outstanding Industry Contributor Award, presented by her longtime friends Rick Donnelly and Elizabeth Sall.

“I was blown away when Elizabeth called me. This really means a lot to me, it is touching,” said Julie. With a dose of the humility that defines her character and work ethic, she jokingly added, “I can’t believe they couldn’t find anyone better!”

Although I couldn’t make it to DC to witness this heart-warming moment, I interviewed Julie over the phone this month to catch up on
what I missed and learn more of her story.

"Heard of the phrase, you either see a glass half-full or half-empty? I’m a half-full gal."

Julie has worked in the transportation industry for 37 years and been involved with TRB for more than 20. Through it all, being an optimist has helped her push forward with enthusiasm through big and small changes.

“Life brings many things we don’t have much control over. The best thing to do is be able to let go and move on.” – Julie Dunbar

Julie remarked that she had an interesting—but not winding—path. Growing up in a small town in Illinois, she chose to follow the family tradition and study physics at Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU), a strong but small liberal arts college. Her passion for engineering continued to call to her, however, and she transferred to University of Illinois’ civil engineering program after three years in IWU, ending up with two undergraduate degrees in five years. She then stayed another year at UIUC and obtained her master’s degree.

Julie’s first job after college was with the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), where she had the chance to work on many long-range plans in a blooming area. Through hard work and the connections she made at NCTCOG, she quickly advanced to project management and TRB involvement.

After 18 years working with NCTCOG, Julie’s husband got a great career opportunity in Illinois and they made the decision to move back. Even though it took Julie away from the job she loved and a location they enjoyed, it was a homecoming for them, and set a new tone for Julie’s profession.

“It was never one of my goals to open my own firm,” she said. However, the combination of diligence, good relationships with past clients and co-workers, and her family situation opened the door for Julie to form Dunbar Transportation Consulting LLC in 2000. She has been on this challenging but rewarding journey ever since.

Getting plugged into TRB
Julie’s first TRB Annual Meeting attendance was in 1984, and her first committee appointment was in 1996 on ADB 50 Planning Application Committee, the committee she currently chairs. This is an astounding record for many young professionals—including me. It is hard to imagine how much time Julie has volunteered, how many commitments she’s made, and how many brain cells she’s killed to fulfill those commitments.

Despite the time- and labor-consuming nature of her TRB involvement, Julie explained to me that TRB has brought numerous benefits as well, including providing a whole new approach to resources and connections both personally and professionally.

How did she get into the ADB 50 world? Destiny—along with a push from her former boss Gordon Shunk, one of the founding fathers of ADB 50. Julie also remarked that one of her biggest career passions is applying new ideas in practical ways and helping decision-makers to effectively spend public dollars. Thus, she stayed with ADB 50 rather than jumping into other committees—which is a loss to them!

As the TRB Annual Meeting gets bigger and bigger, Julie recognizes it can be challenging for young professionals to get involved. Her advice to the newbies is to be persistent and make themselves heard where they can—submitting a paper, volunteering, sharing their work—and to not just give up because of the structure and size.

What would you do with ten million dollars?

Julie has been influential in progressing the travel modeling industry with her excellent project work and dedication to TRB. Rather than asking her to choose her favorite career story, however, I asked how she would spend 10 million imaginary dollars on an investment plan in the industry (a.k.a. not an oceanfront house in the Bahamas). Being a practitioner, she advocated to make an investment to take down the
barriers built by complex and overwhelming analysis techniques and tools.

“We outsmart ourselves sometimes. When the actual users can’t easily figure out what’s going on, it’s a disconnect” – Julie Dunbar

Julie’s desire for open, easy-to-share, and straightforward tools and training programs comes from her experience working with clients who are unfamiliar or unable to learn due to budget or time constraints. To Julie, bridging the gaps between researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders with effective education and tools, thus helping the audience understand the process would be the best place to put those extra dollars.

Julie’s thoughts are actually in line with one of Zephyr Foundation’s goals: Educate and Encourage. The foundation’s emphasis on technical and core competencies is expected to keep the workforce up-to-date and encourage people to come to this unique field. Promoting open, standardized data, and reproducible methods will greatly increase the visibility of products as well as the industry.

What’s next?

When I asked Julie what her next steps are, she said she’s happy where she is, ready to take whatever life brings her and work toward retirement. In addition to continuing involvements with TRB, she plans to plug herself into other volunteering activities — such as supporting Zephyr and serving her local community.

“The only way for us to make progress in this world is to take a few minutes to stop and help others, even if there is nothing for you to gain.”
– Julie Dunbar

Since the beginning of her career, Julie has dedicated herself to the travel modeling and analysis community above and beyond her share. Her selfless contributions and continuous passion for our industry are truly inspiring. Countless people owe her their thanks including the TRB and Zephyr communities.

Congratulations again to Julie Dunbar as the inaugural recipient of Zephyr’s Outstanding Industry Contributor Award.
Want to nominate an Outstanding Contributor for 2019? Nominations are open!

*The Zephyr Foundation’s* mission is to advance rigorous transportation and land use decision-making for the public good by advocating for and supporting improved travel analysis and facilitating its implementation.