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Conversations with Alumni

Spotlight on Jimmy Ochoa and Orchid Monroy-Ochoa

Bachelor of Science in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly, 2009

FOCUS: *An exemplary couple like you is rare in any profession. You were sweethearts when you started Cal Poly and classmates during your all your CRP years, and now work together at Caltrans! Can you tell us about this incredible success story? When did you decide to major in planning and why Cal Poly? Did you share the same passion with the idea?*

We both met in high school and although it was not love at first sight, we did catch each other's eye. In junior college, we noticed we both had similar classes and started to talk more to one another. After a semester in junior college, we decided to start dating. Both of us had a passion for architecture and, like many, fell in love with Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. After completing all of our pre-requisites, we applied for Cal Poly but sadly got rejected. We decided to look into other majors since architecture is such an impacted major. We both were ready to get school done and start our profession. After researching City Regional Planning, we realized it has architecture components, which gave us more of an opportunity to interact with the people.

FOCUS: *What year did you graduate? When did you become interested in transportation and why Caltrans?*

We graduated the summer 2009. We moved back to Modesto, CA and married two weeks after our graduation. Jimmy was the one with a stable job although it did not pertain to Planning. At that time, my goal was to apply anywhere and everywhere. Times were hard back in 2009, and job prospects were slim. A friend from Caltrans informed me of a job opening, and I immediately applied for it. After a long process and over 100 applicants screened and 20 interviewed, I got the call and got hired. Jimmy applied a year later through a similar process and fortunately was hired as well. What we both loved about the City and Regional Planning program was that we could focus on diverse interrelated topics including environmentalism, collaborative public participation, and transportation to name a few. Our passion while in the program was public participation, but afterwards at that time in our life, we needed a job and considered transportation planning. Now it is a job we both love and have a passion towards.

FOCUS: *Can both describe your jobs and position at Caltrans? What are your responsibilities and what type of work do you do?*

Working for a rural district, we have had the opportunity to work in different positions at Caltrans, which is a company with over 20,000 employees and is divided in 12 districts. We work



Orchid, Jimmy, and daughter Olivia.

in District 5 and oversee five counties: Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz County. We entered as entry-level Transportation Planners and over the last three-years have been promoted to Associate Transportation Planners. Orchid works for both the System and Regional Planning Department, which includes developing Transportation Concept Reports (TCRs), a technical document that identifies trends and deficiencies within major corridors and provides a basis for considering future actions to preserve its integrity for the next twenty years. As a Regional Planner, Orchid's also must attend the Technical Advisory Committee and Board meetings for Monterey County. She serves as a liaison between Caltrans and our partner agencies within the county including as the Rail Coordinator and the Training Coordinator for District 5.

Jimmy works within the Advanced Planning Department as the State Highway Operation and Protection Program (SHOPP) and State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) Coordinator. He is responsible for collaborating with external agencies and internal departments to help facilitate and communicate a 10-year project list that will maintain Caltrans' infrastructure assets while also improving the system's infrastructure. Jimmy monitors approximately 60 projects per year maintaining the budgets within a project's planning phase and facilitating communication between the planning department and project development department. He also works with Sacramento Caltrans Headquarters to communicate any new mandates and laws that may impact project development. Lastly, Jimmy

facilitates dialogue with all five counties in District 5 on capital improvement projects which inform Caltrans' planning department on project development.

FOCUS: *Are there other CRP alumni at Caltrans?*

Yes, we know of several other City and Regional Planning colleagues that now work for Caltrans. Just in District 5 we have five people who came from the CRP department.

FOCUS: *Can both of you describe the most memorable work or projects you were involved with? Can you talk about the most rewarding and the most challenging of them?*

Orchid: The project that is most memorable for me is the State Route 68 Scenic Plan. It is currently an ongoing effort and it is being funded through Caltrans Sustainable Communities Planning Grants. The State Route 68 corridor is a key travel route between Salinas and the Monterey Peninsula and is subject to periods of heavy congestion. SR 68 is designated as a scenic highway and is bordered by significant wildlife habitat including the 14,650 acre Fort Ord National Monument and rural low density development in the Sierra de Salinas mountain range connecting to the Ventana Wilderness of the Los Padres National Forest. The SR 68 Corridor Plan will evaluate current and future travel patterns between Salinas and the Monterey Peninsula, the feasibility of SR 68 improvements, and the potential for wildlife connectivity enhancements. The plan will help identify operational and capacity improvements over the next five to twenty years that contribute to the long-range sustainability of SR 68. What I enjoy about this plan is collaborating with our partner agencies and other departments internally in Caltrans. The most challenging part of this project and other projects is always finding funding. Great ideas come out of many plans that have been funded through Caltrans grants but money to make the projects become a reality is always difficult to come across.

Jimmy: One of the most memorial projects that I have been involved in was an innovative project that would allow the conversion of US 101 highway shoulder Between Avila Beach drive to Spy Glass Drive in the Pismo/Shell Beach into a temporary managed shoulder lane during peak traffic times. This project was one of my favorites because the coordination between SLOCOG, SLO County, and the City of Pismo Beach and Caltrans allowed great dialogue that laid the foundation for proper planning for a project that was not traditional to Caltrans. This allowed Design Engineers and Planners to help address environmental, transit, pedestrian, and bicycle needs on this highway segment that was once only auto centric. This was the first time I saw how important planning was in Caltrans and how all the important skills that I learned in CRP was successfully applied in this project.

FOCUS: *How does your education reflect in your work? Do you feel that the classes and skills learned from the BSCRCP program*

support your professional practice? What did the program provide that is fundamental to your professional practice?

We believe that Cal Poly's BSCRCP did a good job preparing us with a variety of skills that can be applied in my every day job. The "learn by doing" model definitely applies at Caltrans. With limited resources, we cannot depend on others to fully transfer their knowledge to us and train us. We have to be self-motivated and willing to learn on our own. My technical skills like ArcGIS, Photoshop, and InDesign have all been used and much appreciated. Not many people know how to use these programs and therefore are more limited in their graphic presentation skills. After all, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Knowing how to present your project effectively verbally, in writing, and graphically is crucial.

FOCUS: *What are the strengths of Cal Poly's BSCRCP program and what do you think could improve?*

The program has great professors, good real world project scenarios, and provides the opportunity to learn a wide range of topics. Areas where the program can improve would be to dedicate more time teaching students how to write compelling arguments that justify the feasibility of their proposed projects. Funding is also a major problem that many agencies face in developing projects. Understanding the many funding sources and laws that help project implementation is an important and crucial skill. Learning how to write and understand grants requirements is also a critical and valued skill that any employer or agency would value in their employees.

FOCUS: *What was the most challenging aspect of transitioning into professional practice?*

We are taught that the sky is the limit and when you transition to the professional practice, especially the public sector, you realize there are a lot of limitations. There are many laws that you need to be aware of and there is also limited funding. As a professional, you always have to remind yourself why you do what you do. In our case, it is to help serve people by providing a safe, sustainable, integrated, and efficient transportation system.

FOCUS: *From your perspective, which are the critical knowledge and skills for planners entering the field?*

Planners need to sharpen their soft skills as opposed to only focusing on hard skills. Soft skills include exercising self-motivation, discipline, effective communication, adaptability, and versatility. Hard skills are great, but you need to communicate your technical skills to people. Listening skill are also often over-looked. In our generation, we feel entitled and should be heard. The abilities to effectively communicate solutions and have a healthy effective dialogue with diverse actors can enhance one's career.

FOCUS: *What do you see as the big challenges in your field of work over the next 5-10 years?*

The biggest challenges in our field include trying to meet State requirements for Greenhouse Gas emissions, the need to support the needs of and increase access for pedestrians and bicyclists while still maintaining current infrastructure assets. We currently do not have enough resources to maintain our large network infrastructure system, and I fear that this will continue for the next five to ten years. Things to look forward to are linked cars and self-driving vehicles.

FOCUS: *Any final words of advice for our students and young professionals?*

We have been so blessed as a couple to have gone to one of the best universities in the nation with a great planning program and be hired by the biggest transportation agency in California. However, it wasn't easy getting here, and it took a lot of patience and persistence. Planners are a vital asset to the many challenges in our evolving world, so we advise you to be fearless leaders and find creative and innovative solutions. Students aspiring to be young planning professionals need to work hard and go make meaningful a difference in their communities. This may sound cliché, but be the change you want to see in the world.