

Conversations with Alumni

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I remember the exact feeling I had when Vicente (FOCUS editor) asked me if I was interested in writing a piece for this alumni Spotlight section. I was so excited, I immediately responded yes and called my fiancé right away to tell her the news! I imagined my story and my picture in the annual publication and sharing my experiences with my fellow alumni. When Vicente shared the previous Spotlight entries with me, the doubt immediately set in. I haven't been doing any fantastic work or any exciting planning projects in faraway places and countries around the world. I have just been writing CEQA documents and doing contract planning in different jurisdictions. Would anyone really want to hear my story?



After spending some time reflecting on my career so far, I think my story and my experiences could provide students and young professionals with a glimpse of what I went through and perhaps provide them with some encouragement, just like I needed at the start. Although my career cannot be considered glamorous, I am becoming a very successful planner in my region. I have been managing countless projects through the planning process that actually get built and make a difference in their communities. So, here we go...

Before studying City Regional Planning at Cal Poly, I studied architecture at my high school in Stockton, California and at Cuesta College. Since I was a kid, I always knew I wanted to go to Cal Poly to become an architect. Having studied architecture for almost ten years, I never thought I would contemplate changing my major. However, after a 20-minute presentation from a Cal Poly planning professor in one of my architecture classes, I was hooked. When transferring to Cal Poly for architecture turned out to be more difficult than expected, I decided to apply to the City and Regional Planning Department.

As fate would have it, I was accepted, and so I began my planning journey. After years of studying architecture and knowing what to expect, I found myself trying to navigate a new campus and learning a brand-new curriculum. I remember sitting confused in CRP 212 listening to Professor Paul Wack while trying to understand the differences between the Planning Commis-

sion, City Council, and Board of Supervisors. I sat there questioning my decision to step away from architecture to learn something new. Nevertheless, I focused and worked as hard as I could, asked questions, and made friends – some I keep in touch with to this day. The classes and material started to become easier, and I began to thrive.

The decision to transfer into CRP would later prove to have been one of the best choices I have ever made, but not before I confronted some very tough obstacles in my personal life. I had been successful in my design labs,

but with what I was going through in my personal life by losing people close to me, my focus and grades began to slip. With my back against the wall and facing dire outcomes, I reached out to Professors Kelly Main and Zeljka Howard for guidance. With their help, as well as Professor Vicente del Rio's, we devised a plan to get me back on the right track. Zeljka's fourth year planning lab, her Planning Boot Camp as she liked to call it, focused me, and with her assistance, I was able to get an internship at the San Luis Obispo County Planning Department. Through the support of my professors, I graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in City and Regional Planning in the Spring of 2011.

Degree in hand, I finally felt accomplished. Little did I know that the hard part, finding a job, was on its way. I moved back home to Stockton, California and applied to jobs in every city I could think of. Yet, a few months after graduation, I found myself still working at the same restaurant I did in high school, without a single interview to speak of. Discouraged, I started rethinking the choices I had made and wondered if my planning degree would ever be put to use. I seemed stuck until December of 2012, when I met someone who decided to take it upon herself to help me refresh my resume, find job opportunities, and really make it her mission to get me out of the restaurant.

Soon, I started receiving responses and requests for interviews. Oddly enough, I even had an interview with an architecture firm. I had been working on some hangar remodelling plans for a family friend when an architect saw my plans and wanted to meet me, though they were not hiring at the time. Not long after, I received a call from a company in Sacramento that I

had submitted my resume to about three months earlier. I had applied for an affordable housing position with them even though I didn't have much affordable housing experience – it was that special someone's idea. Although they decided to hire someone else for that position, they had kept my resume on file for when they needed a planner. I remember feeling very different going into this interview than to my prior interviews. The two people interviewing me were both Cal Poly alumni, and it felt like we just talked about how much we all loved San Luis Obispo for thirty minutes. About twenty minutes later on my way home to Stockton, they called to offer me the job. They also commented on my enthusiastic attitude toward the planning profession and my level of excitement during the interview – again, it was that special someone's idea to let my excitement about being a planner show. I know what you are thinking... I sure owe her a lot, and you are right – Amy and I are getting married in September 2018!

So, in December 2013, my planning career finally began with Raney Planning and Management, Inc., a full-service consulting firm established in 1999 that provide environmental, planning, and housing consulting services to public and private sector clients. In January 2003 the firm merged with Laurin Associates, a firm that provided pre-development financial feasibility and policy analysis for cities, counties, and private developers. Complementing Raney's services, the Laurin Associates Division offers affordable housing and community development consulting services.

Raney's full range of services includes: contract planning; project management; environmental consulting, including California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation; air quality studies; housing market studies; grant applications, administration, and implementation; tax-credit, tax-exempt bond, and state bond applications; housing and community development studies; residential relocation plans and implementation; housing rehabilitation program management; first-time homebuyer program management; housing elements; labor standards compliance; annual monitoring for HOME-assisted rental projects; and other municipal-related planning services.

Applying the knowledge and skills I gained from Cal Poly and its learn-by-doing approach, I jumped into preparing environmental documents for several cities in northern California. During my first year with Raney, I always remembered Professor Chris Clark's teaching: "You will learn more about the planning profession in the first three years of your career than what you will learn throughout the rest of it." That was such a bold statement, but he was so right!

Working at Raney as a planning consultant gave me such an incredible opportunity to experience the planning profession on

every level. I quickly became very knowledgeable with CEQA and NEPA projects both as a consultant and as a contract planner for a small rural community in Yuba County. Through a variety of projects, I have been gaining experience in current and long-range planning at both the private and the public sectors. I have written countless EIRs and Initial Studies for many different jurisdictions (rural, urban, and coastal), a comprehensive update to a Zoning Code, as well as long-range planning documents, including a Bike and Pedestrian Master Plan, a Downtown Corridor Improvement Plan, Community Design Standards, a Housing Element, and Climate Action Plans.

My current planning duties for several different jurisdictions range from working at the public counter, reviewing business license applications, design review, building permit plan checks, preparing staff reports, managing planning projects, presenting to Planning Commission, City Council, and Board of Supervisors, and most recently processing all cannabis applications for a major northern California city. I have also been serving as the contract Planning Director for a northern California city in Sutter County since December 2017. Furthermore, with the support and encouragement from my supervisors and colleagues at Raney, I recently passed the AICP exam.

As I mentioned, I may not work on glamorous and innovative planning projects, but I do get to manage projects through the planning process that improve the communities I work in, including a public charter elementary school for an underprivileged neighborhood, additional single-family housing in a community that desperately needs more housing choices, low-income farmworker housing, habitat for humanity and senior living projects, a new sheriff station to better serve a rural community, comprehensive Zoning Code updates to implement new State legislation and General Plans, and the preparation and adoption of a Housing Element to allow a city to pursue much-needed grant funding.

I often think about my experiences at Cal Poly and how that curriculum and all the wonderful professors in that program have given me the education and tools to succeed in the planning profession. I love being a planner, and I love contributing to better the communities I work in and how each project in every jurisdiction is different with its unique set of issues, which brings new experiences. I look forward to continuing my planning education as the profession changes over time and to the opportunity to contribute to the professional development of students, interns, and beginning professionals, just as so many people have done for me.

