

Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month

May 1 - 31, 2021

The Civil Rights Division is recognizing Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month



Employee Spotlight



Veda Nguyen

Civil Engineering Manager 2, Multimodal Planning Office within the Multimodal Division.

She spends most of her time outside of work with her husband, Shawn, and their two boys, Bodhi and Zen. They enjoy walks in the park and hitting the local playgrounds. When she has time for herself, she enjoys dance and yoga.

Joined TDOT Family January 2016

Tell us about a moment in Asian American History that influenced or shaped your career/life?
Shortly after the Vietnam War, a Communist government came to power in Laos. As a result, during the late 1970's and early 1980's many Lao people, including my parents and my two older sisters, immigrated to the United States as refugees. Because of their courage and sacrifice, I was privileged to be born in the United States which obviously has a huge impact on who I am today.

Who within or outside TDOT has been influential in your career? Are they a mentor today?
I have been fortunate to have worked with many outstanding engineers with both great technical skill and character. Don Yarbrough (outside TDOT) and Brad Freeze (within TDOT) have been the most influential in my career. Both lead with respect and kindness and both work as hard if not harder than any one else on their teams.

Which of the TDOT Values (Stewardship, Integrity, Safety, Consistency, Development, Innovation, Collaboration & Family) that are listed within the Strategic Plan, resonates with you and with diversity? State why?

Definitely Collaboration & Family because both inside and outside TDOT, we need each other, we need to work together to make the world a better place for everyone. We may be different and have different roles, but everyone has purpose and is worthy of respect and kindness.

Why is it important to recognize Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially in 2021?

I think it is important to recognize and celebrate who we are authentically. Like many other people of color, I have always felt like I have had to conform to be successful, to be liked, and to even just not be attacked. But it is nice to just be me and to celebrate my history, my culture, and my family as we are authentically.

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Employee Spotlight Eric Kim



Transportation Specialist, in Region 1, Projection Development Division

He loves to go outside and take pictures of nature, climb indoor rock climbing walls, and play board games with friends.

Joined TDOT Family August 2017

Tell us about a moment in Asian American History that influenced or shaped your career/life?

For my career or life, I do not have a specific Asian history moment to mention, but in the past, many parents of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) struggled to plant roots in a place with a different culture, language, and prejudice. I reflect upon the resilience and energy it took for them to push on through and I truly appreciate the life that they have provided for our next generations.

Who within or outside TDOT has been influential in your career? Are they a mentor today?

While working for TDOT, I have had multiple supervisors and mentors who have been very helpful for me to expand knowledge in my field. Currently, my supervisors, both Aubin Canning and Jay Morgan have helped me excel in my career in Design and they have been easily approachable for advice outside of the job as well.

Which of the TDOT Values (Stewardship, Integrity, Safety, Consistency, Development, Innovation, Collaboration & Family) that are listed within the Strategic Plan, resonates with you and with diversity? State why?

Among the TDOT values, collaboration and family resonates the most with me. I believe all of us are given different gifts and experiences from our personal and diverse backgrounds. And despite our differences, teamwork only works and excels when we learn to appreciate and utilize those individual gifts together as a family.

Why is it important to recognize Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially in 2021?

Since the start of 2020, a rising number of Asian hate crimes and violence have been witnessed and the news planted fear and suffering for many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) communities. To clear misunderstanding of who AAPI are, the Asian American Pacific Island Heritage Month opens opportunities to help bridge cultural gaps by being a part of different cultures. Moreover, the month helps people to understand and celebrate the beauties of all human diversities of the United States of America.

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Employee Spotlight



Melanie Smith

Transportation Project Specialist, Maintenance Asset Management Office

She loves cooking, especially Asian food. She learned how to cook Filipino food from her mother and she loves using food as a way to share her culture. She also is a dedicated dog mom and loves doing outdoor activities with her fur child.

Joined TDOT Family June 2017

Tell us about a moment in Asian American History that influenced or shaped your career/life?

Not sure about Asian history, but my first visit to the Philippines as a child had a huge impact on my life. The aging infrastructure there inspired me to pursue Civil Engineering.

Who within or outside TDOT has been influential in your career? Are they a mentor today?

Jerry Hatcher has been very influential in my career and has always seen my potential. He values diversity and has always provided valuable guidance and advice.

Which of the TDOT Values (Stewardship, Integrity, Safety, Consistency, Development, Innovation, Collaboration & Family) that are listed within the Strategic Plan, resonates with you and with diversity? State why?

Collaboration and Family resonates with me. In my role, it's so important to build relationships in the field in order to provide solutions through our contracts. The Asset Management Division has always felt like a family to me which makes it easy to work together and collaborate.

Why is it important to recognize Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially in 2021?

I think it is important to take time to recognize and celebrate different cultures. As a Filipino-American I am very proud of my culture and it is a huge part of my identity. America is a melting pot and we should celebrate all of our differences.

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Employee Spotlight



Amber Stuart

Software Developer–Adv, Information Technology Division.

She loves being outside enjoying in a lot of paddle boarding and hiking. She also finds delight in hanging at home with the dog and playing video games all night.

Joined TDOT Family April 2015

Tell us about a moment in Asian American History that influenced or shaped your career/life?
I can't think of a particular moment that shaped my life, but seeing the Asian culture being embraced more now than it was growing up, has really made me proud of where my family has come from.

Who within or outside TDOT has been influential in your career? Are they a mentor today?
The entire IT Division really influenced my career change! I'm fortunate to work with such supportive people that have helped and guided me through software school and beyond. If it wasn't for the product development team and the directors, I wouldn't be where I am today, so a HUGE thanks to them for pushing and believing in me.

Which of the TDOT Values (Stewardship, Integrity, Safety, Consistency, Development, Innovation, Collaboration & Family) that are listed within the Strategic Plan, resonates with you and with diversity? State why?

Collaboration! TDOT hires folks from all different types of backgrounds so everyone is bringing something different to the table which pairs well with the collaboration aspect of our work. Listening to other people's ideas and seeing how we all work differently or similarly is always a great learning experience.

Why is it important to recognize Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially in 2021?

I think it's important especially considering all of the chaos going on in the world that we celebrate and embrace Asian American Heritage and really all heritages and cultures. The stress of everything has somewhat divided people when this should be a time that we all come to a mutual understanding and be able to get through the chaos together.

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Employee Spotlight



Juncheng Chen

Transportation Project Specialist, Strategic Transportation Investment Division.

He likes travelling, listening to music and basketball.

Joined TDOT Family January 2019

Tell us about a moment in Asian American History that influenced or shaped your career/life?

Bruce Lee was the most influential martial artists of all time. He appeared as the first Asian-American actor to be in a Hollywood leading role. I have been watching Bruce Lee movies since I was a kid. He was one of the first to give voice to a Chinese man that wasn't comedic but strong. I was encouraged by him to choose to be positive, constructive, and to have faith in myself.

Who within or outside TDOT has been influential in your career? Are they a mentor today?

I was influenced and mentored by my Father. Growing up he always said, "find something that you love to do". My Father taught me the importance of hard work and he encouraged me to find my passion and to go after it.

Which of the TDOT Values (Stewardship, Integrity, Safety, Consistency, Development, Innovation, Collaboration & Family) that are listed within the Strategic Plan, resonates with you and with diversity? State why?

All the TDOT Values resonate with me. They are all important values that I use in my everyday work. These values also help me to work with diverse groups of people and to achieve my goals.

Why is it important to recognize Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially in 2021?

It is important that we continue to celebrate Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders' history, culture, achievements, contributions, and influences that have enriched the United States.

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Employee Spotlight



Yingying Wang

Database Administrator - INT*, Information Technology Division.

She loves running, hiking, fishing, cooking, and reading the Bible. She has been involved in two running and exercise teams, which have encouraged her to stay fit and active.

Joined TDOT Family August 2016

Tell us about a moment in Asian American History that influenced or shaped your career/life?

Min H. Kao is an Asian-American who cofounded Garmin (a pioneer GPS device manufacturer) with Gary Burrell in 1989, and who earned a doctorate in electrical engineering from the University of Tennessee in 1977. Garmin has greatly influenced our everyday lives and businesses. We even have GPS application available through our smartphones. What a great teamwork!

Who within or outside TDOT has been influential in your career? Are they a mentor today?

There have been so many professionals, supervisors, directors within TDOT who have inspired me. They have made the TDOT department like my second home, a melting pot home. My supervisor and directors have been so supportive, encouraging, and considerate to me. I am so blessed to be part of the TDOT family.

Which of the TDOT Values (Stewardship, Integrity, Safety, Consistency, Development, Innovation, Collaboration & Family) that are listed within the Strategic Plan, resonates with you and with diversity? State why?

All TDOT values resonate with me, especially collaboration and family. We need each other. I truly believe together we are stronger.

Why is it important to recognize Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, especially in 2021?

It is important that we continue to celebrate Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month in 2021 in order to pass on and remember the contributions, cultures, invention, and legacies of Asian Americans who, as part of other Americans, have helped build and unite America in successive generations.



Civil Rights Division



Tennessee Department of Transportation

The Civil Rights Division is celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month by recognizing some of our employees.



CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

Employee Spotlight: Bhargav Patel

Transportation Project Specialist Senior
Region 1, Bridge Department

He enjoys traveling, cooking, hiking, and spending time with family and friends.

“We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

Joined TDOT Family July 2009

What does Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month mean to you and why?

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month is a good opportunity to share the history, culture, and experiences from my motherland. It also highlights what has been and/or can be accomplished by the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

What had the biggest influence on your career?

My parents had a big influence on my career. When we first moved to the USA in 1994, they started their lives all over again with very little to their name and had to learn a whole new language. In the span of 10 years, they purchased, managed, and remodeled several hotels. I was very involved in a lot of construction work during the remodeling phases because of my parents' language barriers. I have seen what my parents have accomplished with very little and I know I can accomplish a lot more with what I have been provided.

The TDOT EPIC initiative was launched recently. How do you see your role as empowering people and influencing the culture?

My team and I will continue to encourage each other and grow together.

How do you suggest we create a workforce that supports diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Continue to give everyone the opportunity to highlight their backgrounds, cultures, and accomplishments. Diversity brings in new ideas, experiences, and perspectives that leads to creativity and better problem-solving.



Tennessee Department of Transportation

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Employee Spotlight: Nikita Graves

Transportation Project Specialist, ROW Engineer,
Region 2, Project Development



She enjoys spending time with her husband, Dylan, son, Niam and her two dogs, Cosmo and Nova. She loves hiking, being outside, and going to outdoor concerts in the summer.

“Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilization.” -Mahatma Gandhi

CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

Joined TDOT Family October 2016

What does Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month mean to you and why?

It is important to me being Asian American, to remember my history and to be proud of who I am. Also, it is a great time to remember and recognize the accomplishments, successes, and contributions of Asian American and Pacific Islander community members.

What had the biggest influence on your career?

My uncle had a big influence on my career. He is also a Civil Engineer and growing up he would tell me about his job. Even at a young age, I enjoyed listening to him and learning about his work. I knew I wanted to become a Civil Engineer as well.

The TDOT EPIC initiative was launched recently. How do you see your role as empowering people and influencing the culture?

EPIC will hopefully give people new opportunities that will help them grow within their career and create a positive work environment that everyone enjoys.

How do you suggest we create a workforce that supports diversity, equity, and inclusion?

It is the responsibility of every employee, including my own, to continue shaping the TDOT culture into one that is equal, inclusive, and accepting of all people's thoughts and opinions regardless of a person's race, background, or education levels.



Civil Rights Division



Tennessee Department of Transportation

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Robinur M. Chowdhury, E.I.

Operations District Specialist
Region 4, Memphis TN

He enjoys playing the guitar, outdoor games, and going for long drives.

“Diversity means courage and strength.”

- Robinur M. Chowdhury

Joined TDOT Family January 2019



What does Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month mean to you and why?

The Asian American and Pacific Islanders have made significant contributions to many aspects of American culture, history, and society including science and medicine, literature and art, sports and recreation, government and politics as well as activism and law. In 2021, Kamala Harris became the first Asian American Vice President of the United States. This celebration and/or recognition promotes diversity and equity.

What had the biggest influence on your career?

I got the passion for building something new from my father who was a teacher by profession. One of my uncles played a vital role to make me choose the Civil Engineering education. Nevertheless, I was always amazed to see how a road was built from nothing (soft ground) to pitch-black asphalt (very hard surface) ready for vehicles.

The TDOT EPIC initiative was launched recently. How do you see your role as empowering people and influencing the culture?

Inclusion within the TDOT workforce makes me feel valued and appreciated. I see myself as a pen that connects the dots towards the progress of the EPIC journey.

How do you suggest we create a workforce that supports diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Thanks to TDOT, I have received my permanent residency in the USA while keeping myself busy working for the state of Tennessee. I believe there are many more qualified candidates with diverse backgrounds and ethnicity who deserve a chance to work for TDOT.