

Interview with Arlene Draper

FAA Western-Pacific Region (AWP) Planning and Programming Branch Manager

Conducted by TJ Chen

As part of Black History Month, TJ Chen sat down with Arlene Draper of the FAA Western-Pacific Region to learn more about her career path and how she inspires the next generation of leaders.

Could you provide a quick overview of your current role and responsibilities?

I currently am Planning and Programming Branch Manager for the FAA Western-Pacific Region (AWP). My branch oversees Environmental, Airspace, Safety Management Systems, Planning, PFCs, and all facets of grant programs (CARE, ARRA, CRRSA, AIP and BIL). We also provide oversight to the Airports District Office (ADO) for FAA Headquarters and support both in a consistent manner to ensure communications and procedures are followed.

Some exciting news for the AWP-610 Branch is the recent selection of Ivan Gutierrez as Western-Pacific Region Airports Division Community Engagement Officer. Ivan will provide assistance to airport sponsors on all manners related to community engagement especially on topics related to aircraft noise.

Could you provide a quick overview of your career path?

Growing up in Michigan, I always found airplanes fascinating, but my family had limited resources to afford air travel. I had an opportunity to focus on industrial engineering while in high school, which paved the way to allow me to pursue an engineering degree at Michigan State University (MSU) and provided me the opportunity to realize my fascination with airplanes and aviation. My fascination transitioned from airplanes and aviation to airports, and this could be attributed to Mark McClardy, whom I met at MSU!

After college, I worked for Michigan DOT as a roads and highways engineer and then had the opportunity to work for the FAA in New York as a resident engineer. However, I returned to Michigan DOT as a regional engineer for a few years. I then returned to the FAA in the Detroit ADO as a project engineer and project manager. From there, I stayed in Aviation and gained experience working as a program analyst at FAA Headquarters, learning in-depth financing for all aspects of airport projects; working for 5 years in the private sector at Parsons; and finally returning to the FAA in managerial positions at SFO ADO, Eastern Region ADO, and now AWP 610 branch manager working in the same office with Mark McClardy.

I have now been with the FAA for 26 years.

Who has influenced or inspired you in your career?

Two particular people stand out: Robin K. Hunt, current FAA Manager, ARP BIL Implementation Team and Ellis Onsted, who was FAA Manager of Planning and AIP when I was an analyst with FAA Headquarters.

Robin and Ellis provide constant encouragement throughout my career and mentored and inspired me to become a leader within the FAA.

As you reflect on Black History Month, what inspired you, your career, and you being a leader in the industry?

While I was growing up, I had a passion for aviation. Engineering was the vehicle to help me achieve my goal to work in aviation. Throughout my career, I have not allowed numerous roadblocks to overwhelm me and prevent me from working hard or being willing to take risks. I learned to always look for and pursue opportunities.

Being a leader in the aviation industry means trying to lead by example. We do not always need to be looking to have a title, but we should lead by considering what is the next step to helping others in the industry. As a leader, I strive to mentor others and help a broad and diverse group of aviation professionals to better their leadership skills.

What do you see as challenges for future leaders especially for minority and female professionals and those in the protected groups? Do you have advice to share?

One challenge is that when you are confronted – either unknowingly or knowingly – because of your culture or ethnicity, you need the internal drive to know that you can do your job. Your challenge from within is to never give up “the light that guides your path.”

Also remember that many of us before you were in the same position and now, we are here to lend a hand and help our profession’s emerging leaders. Our responsibility as leaders is to embrace all and give back.

Are you willing to share any fun facts about you or hobbies you have?

I like to walk and exercise. I learned how garden and am relatively successful at it! I also love Cirque du Soleil and have attended most of the the company’s productions.