

2019 Diversity Summit Takes an Introspective and Personal Look at Diversity in the Planning Profession

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The California American Planning Association (APA) Conference serves as annual gathering of planning professionals from every corner of the state and from all backgrounds and walks of life to come together and to learn, connect, and discuss the most pressing issues and exciting innovations in the profession. The 2019 Conference, held this year on California's Central Coast, was no exception, with well over 1,000 attendees convening amongst the red tiled roofs and palm tree lined beaches of Santa Barbara. Over the course of three days in September, planners attended countless seminars and sessions dedicated to exploring strategies, policies, and ideas to better serve the neighborhoods and communities of California.

While the focus on the communities planning professionals serve is of the utmost importance, this year's Diversity Summit decided to take a brief break from the profession's outward focus on the general public and instead turn inwards for a deep, long overdue reflection on our workplaces and our professional community. The summit, titled: "Representation Matters: A Panel on Diversity in the Planning Profession" gathered four professionals with differing backgrounds and varied professional experiences to examine the planning profession internally, taking an honest look at where the profession stands on diversity, inclusion, and equity and how the field can improve diversity.

The panel was moderated by Diversity Summit Co-Chair Denice Thomas, AICP, who is a Planning Programs Section Manager in the County of Ventura Resource Management Division. After opening remarks from Julia Lave Johnston, APA Chapter President and Joel Albizo, Chief Executive Officer, APA, the summit kicked off with an opening statement by each of the four panelists. This opening statement described each of the panelist's personal experiences and professional journey as an individual in the planning profession from an underrepresented group. Each panelist's opening statement was personal and unique, highlighting the unique experiences and diversity of planners practicing in California. Each panelists and their opening statement is briefly summarized below:

Ali H. Mir, a multi-disciplinary planner with 17 year of professional experience, serves as APA-LA's Diversity and Inclusion Director, and is West Regional Planning Manager at STV, Inc. Mr. Mir's statement described his experiences as a Muslim and person of color from his time in university to his role as manager at private consulting firm today, with an emphasis on how assumptions, careless comments, and dated stereotypes are still far too common in professional settings. These biases, whether intention or not, have a profound impact on planners from underrepresented backgrounds in the workplace.

Ebony McGee-Andersen, the founder of ejma Planning + Development, has had a varied career that includes extensive experience in mining and oil/gas permitting, policy implementation, and cannabis regulation. Ms. McGee-Andersen shared her struggles as a woman of color in the profession, and how she overcame these obstacles to open her own firm. Ms. McGee-Andersen shared moving stories of being the only woman of color in the room on many occasions, and how the experience was isolating, and how others often overlooked or did not recognize her ideas as valid because of her ethnicity.

James Rojas, an urban planner, community activist, artist, and founder of Place It!, a community engagement tool for visual and spatial thinkers that has facilitated over 1,000 workshops across the US for mainly underserved and disadvantaged communities. Mr. Rojas described his experiences growing up and working in disadvantaged communities in California, and how thinking outside of traditional planning paradigms can allow professionals to relate better with underserved communities, and encourage historically underrepresented groups to consider planning as a potential career.

Finally, Hemalata Dandekar, a professor and former Department Head of the City and Regional Planning (CRP) Department at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, detailed her extensive international planning work and academic research. Additionally, Ms. Dandekar's personal story focused on her upbringing in India and Great Britain, and how entering the profession as a woman of color was perceived abroad and in the United States.

After each panelist shared their personal stories, panel moderator Denice Thomas led the group in an engaging and refreshingly direct conversation about inclusivity and diversity in the workplace and in the planning, development, and design fields as a whole. Specifically, the group discussed systematic impediments to not only diversity, but true inclusion on the planning profession. Panelists shared ideas on how department and or firm leadership can work to promote inclusivity in the workplace through department culture and structure, as well through improved awareness and hiring practices to encourage the hiring of underrepresented groups. The conversation concluded with departing thoughts on what the biggest benefits to more inclusive planning profession are, along with a questions and answer session.

In conclusion, this 2019 Diversity Summit allowed planners from different regions, communities, and backgrounds to take a moment to pause and to individually and collectively consider how we can strive to make our profession truly inclusive through organizational and personal changes. Moving forward, it is crucial to remember that our profession has a long way to go to be truly inclusive, as evidenced by the experiences of our colleagues and friends. As California planners, we should strive daily to make our profession better reflect the diversity of this great State and its communities.