

Women in surveying: How empowering women will empower the profession

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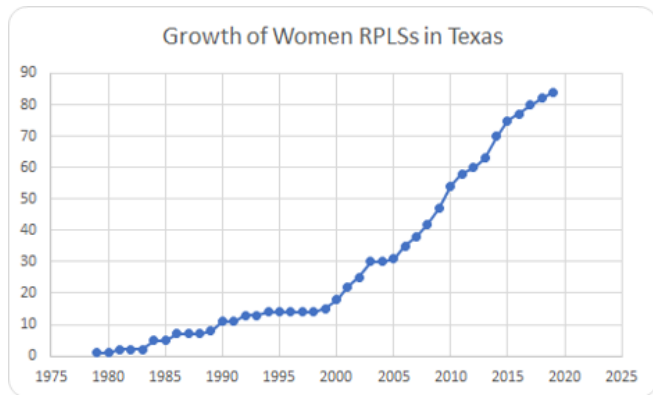
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In any given state across the USA, women surveyors account for approximately 3% of the surveying workforce.

Given that small percentage, it's hard to believe that the number of women surveyors has skyrocketed in most states since 2000.

Anna Rios, RPLS, is the Owner of Aerios Geo LLC. She's also the founder and president of the Women Surveyors Summit.

Today, she's on a mission to provide female surveyors with the support system, network, and mentorship opportunities that she wished she'd had when she started surveying two decades ago.



A woman's path to surveying

Anna began surveying 20 years ago by accident when a temp agency placed her in a secretary role at a surveying company. By chance, the company was owned by a unique individual: the first registered female surveyor in the state of Texas.

Anna quickly fell in love with the profession and pursued a degree at Austin Community College. Unfortunately, it was a rocky road, with her degree program almost canceled due to low enrollment.

What inspired her to stay the course was connecting with other women.

"There weren't very many women in the profession at that time, and there still aren't enough," Anna said. "Oftentimes, you're the only woman in a room full of men that are surveyors - or in the field, or in an office."

Her good fortune led her to work under another woman surveyor after obtaining her degree. That company paid for her to become a member of the Texas Society of Professional Surveyors.

Soon after joining, she was nominated as secretary-treasurer for her local chapter, followed by the role of president, followed by an additional role as the Texas representative for the NSPS Young Surveyors Network. She eagerly embraced each new opportunity.

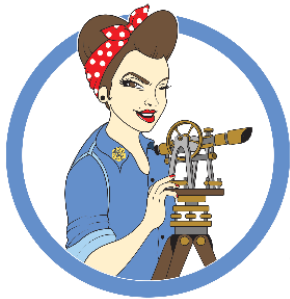
All this time, apart from the two women surveyors she had worked under, Anna was surrounded by male surveyors day in and day out. Then, in 2016, Anna had attended the Young Surveyors Conference and met several women surveyors from Minnesota.

"I finally felt connected and accepted as a surveyor, not just this one woman in the room. And I had been in the profession for 15 years at that point," Anna said. "Being in the profession for that long and never really feeling you knew where you fit in - it can be frustrating. You can be unsure of what you're doing. You can think about changing your mind over and over again, questioning if you're even in the right place."

The experience of connecting with fellow female surveyors was an inspiring one.

"That's when I realized that I wanted to have a women's summit. At some point, I wanted to gather the women that are in the profession, get them together, and let them know they're not the only one in the room," Anna said.

The first Women Surveyors Summit



Women Surveyors Summit

Flash forward to 2019, and Anna finally found herself in the position to make that dream a reality.

The president-elect of the Texas Society of Professional Surveyors approached Anna and said that she had a willing sponsor for a women's summit. She was hoping Anna would take the lead and make it happen.

Within just six months, the event was organized. With the support of TSPS and the TSPS staff's assistance, Anna planned to start small the first year, setting aside space for 30 women to gather in Austin, Texas. The event sold out in just three days, even after doubling the number of attendees allowed.

The final attendee count was 65 women from 10 states, thanks to some creative workarounds in partnership with the local tourist office.

The inaugural Summit events included educational courses, a guided tour of the Texas general land office, and a panel discussion on workforce development and diversity. After a full day, there were social excursions to local breweries to enjoy.

"It was not just about the connection. It was also about creating visibility of women in the profession," Anna said.

"I think it's been a long time coming. Right now, there are more and more women that are in leadership positions and really passionate about sharing the profession with others."



Heather Sides, RPLS and Vice President at LJA Surveying, couldn't agree more. She appreciated the value of the summit's keynote speakers and formal activities. But what really impacted her was the time outside of the classroom.

"There were conversations that we had that don't typically happen when you're hanging around a bunch of guys surveying," she said.

In Heather's mind, sharing mistakes is the Foundation of healthy mentoring.

"I like getting gritty. I like talking about those hard conversations," she said. "Mentors that they can kind of look at and go, you know, we're here. We've screwed up. Let's learn from what I've done and kind of get a little gritty on stuff. That's kinda what I'm looking for."

Many attendees found just that. They quickly continued the professional bonding experience on a Facebook group that was formed after the event.

The Future Surveyors Foundation

It was clear that there was a demand for an annual Women Surveyors Summit. The next question became, how to fund it?

The answer came in the form of the birth of The Future Surveyors Foundation, a 501c3 non-profit organization focused on creating opportunity, inspiration, and support for the surveying profession.

Spearheaded by Anna, the Foundation's goals go far beyond funding a gathering of female surveyors once per year. Instead, the bigger goal is to promote the diversity and health of the surveying profession as a whole.

"The foundation is really in place to help promote surveying, and bring that visibility for the profession," Anna said.



To get the Foundation off the ground, Anna reached out to Heather Sides to join as a board member as Vice President, along with Virginia Winberg, PLS, as the Secretary/Treasurer.

"Being able to contribute to an organization like the Foundation, which promotes diversity in the profession, is really important to a lot of companies. And I think this is a great way for them to be able to do that," Virginia said.

The Foundation offers four sponsorship levels for individuals or groups that want to support the Women Surveyors Summit. In addition, each level provides sponsor advertisement opportunities.

"One of the things that we are offering to all participants of the Summit is an event t-shirt with the summit logo on the front and all of the sponsors' logos and names displayed on the back," said Virginia.

Those branded t-shirts will soon be the new wardrobe staple of female surveyors nationwide if all goes well.

Meeting the need for mentoring

Both the Summit and the Foundation serve to underpin a more global need: the importance of mentors in the surveying profession.

"I really struggled to find a true mentor. I think mentors in surveying are sometimes hard to find, whether they're too busy to really help you or too busy to guide you," Anna said.

"A lot of surveyors, especially the older generation, they got into surveying, so they didn't have to deal with very many people. So sometimes they just aren't very good at communicating or working with others. And sometimes they just don't know how to support the younger generation."

Even more than her status as a woman, Anna felt the void of not having a mentor to help guide her along the way. When she questioned where she fit into the profession, a mentor could have helped ease those fears.

The goal of both the Summit and the Foundation is to begin formalizing the process of filling those mentorship gaps.

"Anybody that's interested in the profession, we need to support those people because we need them. Retaining staff and workforce has been a big issue because there are so many people that just kind of get thrown into the fire, and it's a sink or swim type of situation, and they're not really supported," Anna said.

Virginia couldn't agree more.

"One of the things that I'm passionate about is being involved in STEM events and attending high school career fairs; promoting the profession that way. So, I'm hoping that the Foundation is able to help support either financially or provide information, content, material to other surveyors out there, giving them an opportunity to volunteer in that way as well," Virginia said.

Virginia's personal goal as a board member of the Foundation is to help create that network. She hopes this will make it easier to find speakers to tap for various events and educational opportunities.

"I think we can all agree how important mentoring is in this profession because you really need to have that continuity across generations of surveyors. You have to know that history and that background," Anna said.

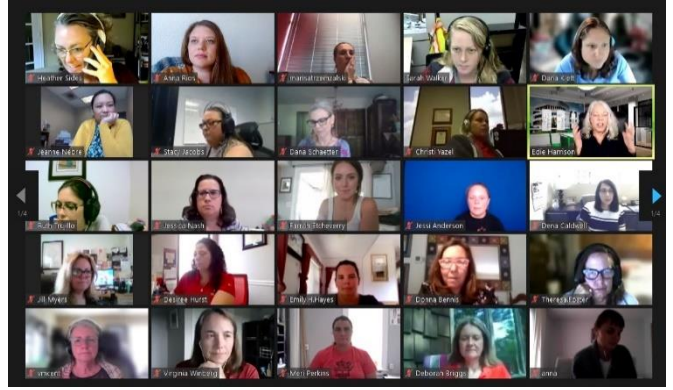
In Anna's mind, it's all about cementing that bridge between young and senior surveyors, old and new methodologies, and historical and high-tech skills.

The 2021 Summit

The 2021 Women Surveyors Summit just wrapped up on July 22-23. The summit had over 100 attendees registered, from over 30 states and 4 countries, making it an international event!

It was set up as an interactive virtual event, which means the number of participants possible was much higher than the inaugural 2019 event (the 2020 event was canceled due to COVID).

Anna kicked off the welcoming session, followed by a corporate trainer, Edie Harrison, who ran a workshop on difficult conversations.



"I think we all struggle with that, men and women both. But specifically for women, sometimes it's hard for us to ask those questions, or to negotiate properly, or to come back and say, 'Hey, you know, I need more money' for their salary," Anna said.

There was also be a diversity panel discussion and update from Get Kids Into Survey, breakout groups, and more.

"People don't want to sit in front of their computers all day long. So we kind of broke it up into a couple of days and did some specific fun things during the days, but still tried to give us some time that we can do that networking," Heather explained.

A two-hour happy hour provided ample time for fun and networking.

Through it all, the spotlight was on surveying, and the powerful women across the country who are helping it happen.

"It was really, really powerful to hear a lot of people's stories and the things that they are passionate about," said Heather. "

"We've got a whole lot of generations that are going to have to follow in our footsteps. We need to make sure that they know where we're going, and where we're walking, and where we've been," Anna said.

Goals of the Women Surveyors Summit

- Provide support to women in the profession – We want the attendees to leave summit feeling supported and accepted as both a surveyor and a woman in a historically male profession.
- Create visibility and acceptance of women in the profession.

It's a poignant mix: the Summit is about surveying, it's about women, and most importantly, it's about a passion for giving back.

- Follow the [Future Surveyors Foundation](#) on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Instagram](#)
- To support the Summit, email info@futuresurveyors.org

Anna Rios, RPLS, is the Owner of Aerios Geo LLC. She is a member of both the National and Texas Society of Professional Surveyors, former Texas Young Surveyor State Representative, and recently served as an Adjunct Professor for Austin Community College. She remains active on many committees to promote the Land Surveying and Geospatial profession. Anna has been in the surveying profession since 2001 and her background includes experience in a wide variety of surveying services encompassing commercial, residential, and municipal projects. She is licensed in Texas and received the Texas Young Surveyor of the Year award in 2019. Anna earned her Certificate of Land Surveying/Geomatics from Austin Community College in 2005 and her Bachelor Degree of Science in Business Administration from LeTourneau University in 2015.

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