



## Leaving Her Mark

### **Long-Time Water System Engineer Julie Spacht Reflects on 40 Years of Service**

By Christina Holland

When Julie Spacht began her career with LADWP, she was the only female engineer in the Water System. Forty years later, more and more women are entering the workforce as engineers and the Department's number of women engineers is now 230 strong. Early on, Julie made her mark and was soon tapped for recruiting duties. One of her more famous recruits is currently sitting at the helm of the Water System, Richard Harasick.

Before retiring in June 2019, Julie sat down with *Intake* to talk about an almost four-decade project (the Mulholland Pipeline Project), how the Water System has evolved, and how one assignment changed her view on the world.

***Intake:* We'd love to know about your background. Where did you go to school, what led you to LADWP and what was it like when you started?**

I graduated from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign where the Department was recruiting engineers. In fact, LADWP did quite a bit of Midwest recruiting. So there's a whole cohort of Midwesterners who came to the Department within a two-year period: Susan Rowghani (retired), Steve Ott (retired), Bill Glauz (retired), Heidi Hiraoka, Penny Falcon (retired), and Terri Koch (retired).

I vividly remember my first day. I was hired as an LADWP civil engineering assistant, which was much better than being a Caltrans junior engineer. The two people I remember most specifically were Tom Rulla (retired waterworks engineer) and Bob Giles (retired senior waterworks engineer). Tom showed me how to navigate the freeways and Bob genuinely made me feel welcome. So I thought: I made it through the first day, I guess I can come back tomorrow.



Julie Spacht was the only engineer in the Water System when she began her career in **February 1980**.  
Photo by Art Mochizuki

**Intake: I'm sure you've come in contact with many utilities in your career, what makes LADWP unique?**

There are a number of things. One of them is the great feat of having a gravity-fed water system. That's quite unique in the Water System - bringing water from Mono County all the way to the Harbor by gravity alone. It is the ultimate, carbon-free, no energy generation required, water supply delivery system that in fact, generates power on the way to the city.

Another thing that makes us very unique is the conservation ethic, not just with saving water, but with saving money. I am amazed at how penny pinching the Water System is, in every respect - ensuring that we don't spend more money than we have to. And I don't know that our customers know or realize that. There are lots of things we can do from a business perspective, that would make it easier for individuals personally and the Water System as a whole, but we choose to keep conservation as the focus. Take for example, the concept of a volumetric rate, and our investment in conservation devices and rebates. It would be easy to take another path and collect the revenue - letting our customers use more and pay more for their water.

A Water System employee has so much to be proud of; we provide one of the most essential elements in life. I have to say that in day-to-day operations I always had an opportunity to at least be heard. Often enough, I had a say in what was happening, which makes a job with the Department very gratifying. It

goes back to the civil service concept - value for what you are doing and value for what the city gets.



Spacht with her Water System gal pals, from left: Penny Falcon (retired), Evelyn Cortez-Davis, Heidi Hiraoka, and Susan Rowghani (retired). Photo by Art Mochizuki

***Intake: Can you tell us about some of your first projects? What are some of your favorite and most challenging projects?***

I was assigned the Mulholland Pipeline and environmental documentation for the Corbin Water Tank. The four million gallon Corbin Tank was completed in 1987, but the Mulholland Pipeline was just completed a couple of years ago. I know that very specifically, because I went out to the job site and watched the guys put in the last piece or so. To actually get the Mulholland Pipeline done took a while as Water System projects were periodically re-prioritized. The 1991 earthquake, the growing need for water quality improvements, conservation, and the need for replacing existing infrastructure are all continuing priorities. Situated in the Santa Monica Mountains, along scenic and heavily trafficked Mulholland Drive, the pipeline is over two and half miles long and will serve a critical function by moving water from east to west or west to east as needed during emergencies. That's what I worked on first and it was finally completed in 2016.

Throughout my career, I had some opportunities to work on many great projects such as the Los Angeles Aqueduct Filtration Plant (LAAFP), which was **the** big project for a whole generation. The generation before me had the second barrel, (the second L.A. Aqueduct). And then **we** worked on the filtration plant. That was 33 years ago but I know it specifically because my eldest daughter who just

got married, was born the week they commissioned the plant. It's so interesting to note that prior to LAAFP, the water was chlorinated, period. And we also had a fallout plan that dictated how we would operate the Water System in the event of a nuclear disaster. Now, our reservoirs are covered and everything that we do with our water (treatments and safeguards) is so much more extensive. It was a completely different time back then.

I've also had the opportunity to work with the native tribes in the Owens Valley. It was different than engineering work, it was challenging, and it was rewarding in that it gave me a whole new way of looking at things. It's the reason I didn't retire in 2012. The tribal representatives that I worked with taught me so much and gave me a different way of looking at the world, at my own life, and how I fit in.

***Intake: What advice did you get that you'd like to pass along to women entering the engineering field or starting their career at LADWP?***

When I started, I was the only woman engineer in the Water System. And for the most part, I was just Julie - meaning I was treated individually and not as a *woman* engineer. Looking back, I appreciate the opportunity that let me do as I was able and to promote as quickly as anyone.

Something I would tell young women is don't take yourself so seriously, put your mind and effort towards what you want to accomplish and just do it. Being good at what you do at the Department will allow you to be quite successful. I also think it's important to take an occasional but calculated risk. There is a distinction between risk and chance. Risk can be calculated and managed; chance is arbitrary. Take risks, not chances.



Expressing her fun side, Julie dressed up as “The Drop” for Halloween during one of the drought years. Photo by Carol Tucker

***Intake: We see so many colorful retirement posters around JFB depicting a variety of interesting retirement plans. What will you miss most about the Department and how do you see life after LADWP?***

The people, obviously. There are so many people who have given me opportunity, consideration and just listened somewhere along the way and all that adds up to the ability to be as successful as I’ve been. A while back I told Richard [Harasick] as long as I had interesting work and felt like I was making a contribution I didn’t see any reason for retiring. Now, with Susan [Rowghani] and Penny [Falcon] retired, it just wouldn’t be the same. So, after driving three hours a day for all these years, I think I’ve left at the right time.

Retirement will give me the chance to spend more time with the Court Appointed Special Advocate, (CASA) organization. We advocate for foster kids who go through a lot of change with different homes, schools, doctors, and social workers and we [CASA] are an important constant in their lives. I think back on all the opportunities that I've had and I just took it for granted that everyone had the same access. I've been very, very lucky throughout my career. With the foster youth, that is not the case. They do not have the connection and the support that you should have to be successful.