

# Transit Titan

*A WMATA employee's journey from immigrant to leader* BY KEN ABRAMCZYK

AFTER ANGEL PEÑA OBTAINED A bachelor's degree in his native Venezuela, he moved to the United States at the age of 27. He attended the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., to obtain his master's degree in civil engineering. As he had never spoken English, was never exposed to American culture and was the only Latino in his course of study, he faced what he calls now his greatest challenge: communication.

Peña knew he had a choice.

"Either I would have to separate myself from my peers and pursue my degree in solitude, or I would just have to work that much harder to learn the language and work with the people around me to succeed," Peña says.

He chose to learn English to help him work with others in teams, which is critical in engineering. "You cannot control what other people think of you," Peña says. "I simply did not want my nationality or race to be an excuse not to succeed, so I relied on hard work and integrity to achieve my goals."

Peña took those steps and remained in the United States. Today, he is the managing director of the Office of Quality Assurance, Internal Compliance & Oversight (QICO) for the Washington Metro Area Transit Authority (WMATA). He also has held positions as an executive senior program manager and senior project coordinator in other WMATA offices.

Peña says it was an easy decision to pursue engineering as a career choice. His parents, Beatriz and Angel Peña, were engineers. He describes his mother as his "source of inspiration." "I watched her every day utilize engineering principles, lead teams and accomplish goals," Peña says. He saw his parents "in action, and I still see them in action, so they were my mentors at

an early age by seeing how they made decisions to drive change and how engineering can contribute to society."

Peña graduated from Universidad Yacambú, in Venezuela, with a Bachelor of Science in industrial engineering and landed a job at Kraft food company. While he worked at Kraft, Peña visited his parents in the United States during the holidays. Peña saw that they struggled with a new culture, so he obtained a work visa and moved here to give them support and encouragement. Peña wanted to be exposed to a new culture, learn new ideas and provide some of his own for engineering solutions.

After he immigrated to the United States, he focused on engineering management studies within the civil engineering department at the Catholic University of America. In 2010, he interned with the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), supporting the 11th Street Bridge and D.C. Streetcar projects, quickly working his way up to a project engineer position and beginning his professional work in the transit industry.

Still, he experienced challenges in a STEM career as a minority. While he interned at DDOT, he worked to improve his verbal communication. He believed he was judged differently because of his accent. "That made it harder. However, I chose to work harder and let them see the results," he says. "Instead of trying to convince everyone that I knew what I was talking about, that I was capable of the job, I let the end product of my work do the talking. I never let others define me for what I do and who I am. My work speaks for itself."

Today, Peña's end products consist of a series of initiatives and programs to help improve WMATA's Metro, including a quality-assurance framework of the Metro's

Angel Peña



assets, leading to greater maintenance group accountability and improved service to passengers. QICO also has deployed WMATA's first agency-wide quality management system plan and its first internal review of Metro's transit operations functions, resulting in the coordination of 69 internal corrective and preventive actions.

These are lofty duties for someone who moved to the United States 10 years ago and now is the managing director for the second-largest public transit agency in the country.

What advice does Peña have for other minorities facing challenges in the workplace? "No matter what the job is, do the best you can," he says. "Take that challenge and make it work."

He recalls a time when, as a project leader at Kraft, he was responsible for the optimization of a production line at the Nabisco factory in Venezuela. Addressing a problem with the taste in Oreo crème, a supervisor put quality control above the company's profit.

"When I questioned the apparent disregard for the bottom-line protocol, he asked me, 'Angel, do you know why we make cookies? So people will buy them. The product dictates the profit; the profit cannot dictate the product.' The 'why' was to sell cookies, not simply to reduce costs."

That lesson hasn't been lost on him. "The 'why' of anything must be simplified to its lowest form," he says. "In my current position, the 'why' is for me and my whole career to clearly define a leader's role in public transit." ■