

How Next-Level Team Building Helps Boost Housing Affordability

Unique training with the UCLA Ziman Center emboldened an entry-level professional to inspire her colleagues

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Fresno has been my home since 1994. It is a city in the Central Valley of California, located about 250 miles north of UCLA. I am 25, a Laotian immigrant, and I was born in Argentina, raised in the Central Valley.

I grew up poor. My parents worked very hard as factory workers and collected cans and bottles at night to recycle for a little bit of extra money. When I was a child, I didn't realize or notice the impoverished conditions we lived in. All I knew was that my parents

worked so hard and long to keep a roof over my head that they missed out on some of my proudest moments.

I'd like to think that these are the moments that inspired me to help others. Ever since I was a child, I was interested in human connection, and I always gravitated toward finding opportunities to give back. In college, when I joined a volunteer club, I decided that I wanted a career in which I could help others.

One of my passions is building teams and helping people realize that their goals are achievable. For instance, I volunteered to help coordinate my organization's participation in citywide corporate games as a wellness project (I also tried to implement Pilates in the office on Fridays, and that dream didn't pan out as great – but you learn through failure!). On my own time I maintain an Instagram page called [@laotianathletes](#). I post stories and photo submissions from Laotian people with a goal of teaching them about self-promotion while showing my community that there's a place for them in the fitness world.

In 2015 I embarked on a California Coalition for Rural Housing Internship (CCRH). The main focus of the internship was to increase diversity in the affordable housing development industry. I was placed at Visalia nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), where I later accepted a permanent position as a project technician.

My department focuses on creating affordable rental housing in the Central Valley (Tulare, Kings, Kern, Madera, Merced, Fresno, Mariposa and Stanislaus Counties). SHE not only produces rental communities, but we also create opportunities for families to become homeowners through our Self-Help Housing program, and we contribute to providing communities with water and sanitation infrastructure.

Three years into my career in affordable housing, my organization encouraged me to apply for training in the UCLA Ziman Center's [Howard and Irene Levine Affordable Housing Development Program](#). Although I had been to LISC (California Local Initiatives Support Corporation) and NeighborWorks trainings, I'd never experienced a training like the program offered at UCLA. It allowed me to learn not only why or how housing development can work to solve affordability problems, it gave me a hands-on opportunity to learn about the housing development process through a case study project. This program is unique and is the best affordable housing training I've ever had.

The hands-on experience the group projects afford and each team's opportunity to work with architect mentors are what truly set the program apart. Although some prime examples of L.A. housing developments were very different from the rural areas I typically serve, there was a lot of critical

overlap. It was useful to see how bigger developments are created compared to our smaller projects. And I've been making connections left and right.

I met a lot of assistant project managers from different organizations who gave me valuable insight on how other organizations are structured and operated. The training at UCLA had me going back to my office with lots of questions. I thought about areas in which my department could grow and become more efficient. One of the processes I wondered about was whether there might be greater benefits to shepherding projects on a sustained basis rather than working on bits and pieces of certain projects.

After I completed the training, I brought up in one of our office's weekly meetings the possibility of reexamining my department's structure. I shared information that encouraged our team to reflect on whether we were operating as efficiently as possible, and to think about different ways to improve learning and opportunities for growth.

All in all, my department was really receptive. We are now actively seeking the best way to structure our department.

I think the most valuable skill I received from the UCLA Ziman training was learning to speak up. It empowered me to open lines of communication and now our thoughts, ideas and feelings are really heard. I'm also equipped with knowledge of processes and methods that could make our work more efficient.

We work in an industry where we are trying to do good in the world; why not try to do good, better?