

• NEXT STEP •

Advice from Young Engineers Moving Forward in Their Careers

Look for Opportunities And Stay Optimistic

AAFREEN LATHEEF, EIT, A.M.ASCE, landed her first engineering job shortly after graduating from the University of California, Davis with a degree in civil engineering and a minor in construction engineering and management. She has been working in the field ever since, primarily on projects like levees and slurry walls that reduce the risk of flooding. While at college, she was vice president of an organization that helped fellow Muslim students acknowledge and deal with their stress and anxiety—a topic often considered taboo in her culture. She says her natural optimism and penchant for problem-solving have helped her in both roles.

How did you land your job at Odin Construction Solutions?

I met with Odin at a career fair. One of my minors was in construction engineering and management, and they seemed really interested in what I offered. I went to the interview a few weeks later and realized that working there would be a lot different from what I had learned. Odin primarily works on levees and environmental remediation. I thought that was a very interesting field because it speaks to the safety and security of a community. If river levels rise, people need to be protected. I talked to some of the project managers about what they do there and how levees work, and I thought it was a good fit.

How does your job relate to what you learned in school?

When I started, I didn't have much of an understanding of how a levee worked. So my understanding came on the job. I started in August and from then until April I was researching, doing reports, doing submittals, and working with the client, the superintendent, and the project team to learn as much as I could about levees and how they differ from cutoff walls and slurry walls. I didn't get that from college.

But what I did take from college was the ability to analyze data and translate that data into a digestible format for different audiences. The way you present data will differ if you are presenting it to someone with your own technical experience versus a client, and that is different from presenting data to a project manager.

One of my favorite parts of college was senior design,

where we had to analyze a lot of data about Amazon, how deliveries work, how transportation works, and how to reduce congestion. The whole point of it, more than the data itself, was how to process that data and present it to the general public so they could understand what our solutions were and why they would work.

I also learned about communication at college. I learned how to get along with all kinds of people.

What are the responsibilities of your job?

My responsibility as a project engineer is making sure the project runs smoothly. That includes helping our intern collect data, helping our project manager with daily reports, and helping the site superintendent if there is a problem. Also, if the client has an issue, I help develop solutions.

What personal traits or characteristics help you in this role?

I've always been good at problem-solving. I've never met a puzzle I couldn't finish, even as a kid. And there is never a day when there isn't a problem to be solved.

And as much as I don't like mornings, I always show up to work with a smile on my face. I'm very positive and optimistic. I have a can-do, tackle-the-day attitude.

I feel that if I do my best, everything will fall into place if it's meant to. And if it's not meant to, then that's just another problem to be solved.

What role did mentors, advisers, or your network play in your achievement?

You can't get anywhere without support and help. My project team has been invaluable to me, and the specialists we work with, who have decades of field experience, help me learn more than what I learned in academia.

Also, our company CEO, Louay Owaidat [P.E., M.ASCE], places a lot of responsibility on us and makes sure we know that we are empowered to make decisions. If we have a good idea, he's always ready to listen. And he supports our involvement in organizations like ASCE and encourages us to get our P.E. and pursue higher education.

What advice would you give to those who have graduated from college in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic?



**Aafreen Latheef,
EIT, A.M.ASCE**

CURRENT ROLE
Project Engineer, Odin
Construction Solutions,
Rocklin, California

PREVIOUS ROLE
Civil engineering student,
University of California,
Davis

It's very difficult for them in the current climate. They didn't get a proper graduation and to enjoy that last bit of college. But I would tell them to reflect on the fact that they have already overcome a lot—they *did* graduate—so they should focus on the positive. More avenues will open up if they stay strong and resilient.

What types of positions do you see yourself moving toward next?

I want to develop my leadership and supervisory skills. I want to be able to make decisions from experience. On the tech-

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nical side, I just got my EIT, so now I want to work on getting my professional engineering license in civil engineering.

And in general, I want to do good in the world by giving my input.

In college you volunteered with the Beautiful Minds Project, which seeks to inform UC Davis students about mental health issues and support them through their challenges. What inspired you to do that?

One of my friends started the Beautiful Minds Project to raise awareness of mental health issues in the Muslim community, where they don't tend to discuss or even acknowledge those issues. Their solution to stress or anxiety tends to be to say, 'Just don't worry.' Our idea was to say that no matter what culture you are from, you may still have those struggles; anxiety and depression are real disorders. And they are nothing to be ashamed of. We wanted to give people a sense of belonging and just help them to breathe.

I was the vice president during my senior year, and it was very rewarding. We had activities to help people relax,

especially during the very stressful time of finals. And we brought in professionals in the mental health fields who also come from our culture to speak. One of my best friends is now pursuing her doctor of psychology because of her involvement with the organization.

What is one item that you can share from your personal or professional bucket list?

I don't know if I have a bucket list yet at age twenty-two, but I have always wanted to surf. I was born in a coastal town, and I've always wanted to try it.

And I've always wanted to go to Australia and see the Sydney Opera House after driving over the bridge that leads to it.

What would your coworkers be surprised to learn about you?

I played violin for years. I've been playing since I was six or seven years old. And I am starting to learn the guitar now.

What quote or principle do you try to live by?

I always tell myself, 'This, too, shall pass.' When I am feeling anxious, I tell myself that things will resolve themselves however they are supposed to.

What is one daily routine you couldn't do without?

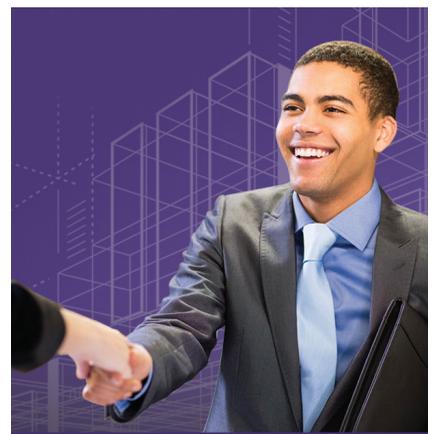
I love watching the *Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. He makes things funny but has a sense of realness to him.

Where do you think the field of civil engineering is headed in the next five to ten years, and where would you like to see it go?

I'm very optimistic for the future of civil engineering. I expect more development in cars and transportation methods and improvements in infrastructure with respect to safety. And I'm excited about making things stronger, making things safer, making things better. I look forward to playing a role in shaping that future.

—LAURIE A. SHUSTER

Are you a younger member who has recently taken the next step in your career? We'd like to hear from you. Email cemag@asce.org using the subject line "Next Step."



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