



New Fellow Spotlight: Robin Kramer

Managing Director

The Smidt Foundation

Robin Kramer is managing director of The Smidt Foundation, whose flagship program, Harbor Freight Tools for Schools, she led and help grow over the last several years. Harbor Freight Tools for Schools was launched out of the animating belief that access to excellent education in the skilled trades gives high school students pathways to graduation, opportunity, good jobs and meaningful careers, and a workforce our country needs. This program is central to the overall aims of the Smidt Foundation, founded in 2016 by Harbor Freight Tools CEO and founder, Eric Smidt: to help achieve opportunity, justice, equality and safety for all. The foundation operates with an invest-or-invent mindset, with humility, and a combination of both urgency and respect for the complexity of addressing community challenges. Robin brings to this work a varied background in public, private, and nonprofit leadership. She was appointed chief of staff to two Los Angeles mayors, Antonio Villaraigosa and Richard Riordan— the first woman in the city’s history to serve in this post-- and later served as commissioner for the Port of Los Angeles. She has held senior positions at the Broad Foundation, the California Community Foundation, and the Annenberg Retreat at Sunnylands; she also worked extensively as an independent consultant for a variety of entities focused on advancing access, equity, and engagement in civic life, public education, and the arts. Earlier in her career, she was chief deputy for Los Angeles city councilmembers Richard Alatorre and Bob Ronka, and executive director of two nonprofits (Coro and Reboot). She helped lead several local ballot measure campaigns, including securing broad reforms in the Los Angeles Police Department, working closely with Warren Christopher and a community coalition to do so. A volunteer for many community-serving nonprofits over the years, she completed two terms as chair of the Pitzer College board of trustees, and she is currently a member of the board of the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation and the Partnership for LA Schools. Robin holds an MA in urban studies from Occidental College and a BA in political studies and journalism from Pitzer College.

What are you most looking forward to as a NAPA Fellow?

Gleaning ideas that might be put to use in our community, and meeting an array of humans who bring zeal and commitment to our country and give life and lift to our democratic values and aspirations.

What inspires you during these challenging times?

The do’ers across sectors who listen well and know how to pivot, go forward and lead with a beautiful blend of drive, pragmatism and optimism.

What do you enjoy most about the work you do?

Having the opportunity to help make a difference and working with amazing people —together playing a small role, and with deep humility, to leave the campsite much better than we found it – particularly in the skilled trades and high school education, and in supporting some valiant efforts to leverage meaningful change in public education and the delivery of public services.

Who or what inspired you to work in public service?

Four decades ago, I volunteered for my first political campaign as a high school student, working fervently to get two candidates elected to our local school board because I saw up close the grinding inequalities of our local public school system. (They were roundly defeated, however.) The values of fairness, justice and equality come from my family; my parents were first generation Americans who believed so strongly in the promise of our country and the obligation to participate not sit idly by .

Which of the Academy's Grand Challenges resonate most with you?

Meaningful work!

What advice can you give to folks beginning careers in public service?

This is the chance of a lifetime. Go for it – be creative, be a sponge --and learn from everyone and from every task and responsibility. Expect to be edited. Find a good mentor. But if you are arrogant, please do look for another career and sector. Really.

What is the first concert you attended?

Memorably-- The Grateful Dead at Mammoth Gardens in Denver, Colorado.