

THE LADDER

Linda Hung: ‘Where you have unique skills, make sure they’re seen’

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Linda Hung, vice-president of FORREC, poses for a photograph in their Toronto office on March 13, 2019. CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Linda Hung, 50, is a vice-president at FORREC Ltd. in Toronto. She was previously senior director of theme parks at FORREC, which is one of the biggest resort, theme and water-park design companies in the world, with projects in 20 countries.

I always had an artistic side, loved drawing and sketching. My first memory of theme parks, 12 years old, was flying to see Orlando, the only family vacation we'd taken. I remember it being overwhelming, a sensory overload. I had no idea that type of place existed; it's probably what inspired me – subconsciously – and I grew a passion for it.

I was born and raised in Toronto, my parents from Hong Kong, China.

We lived a while with my grandma. When our family could afford our own home, we moved to East York. My early years, my dad inspired me with advice. Really serious, he sat me down: “Linda, you’re not smarter than other people around you. ... You just need to work harder than everybody else.”

My passion and dream in my teens was to be an architect; the arts, mathematics and science together. I applied to the University of Toronto and didn’t get in, my first big setback. It took me years to get over that, but I went into landscape architecture. That was the best thing; it’s much better suited to me and opened up a whole different world. Another setback was graduating in 1992 in a recession. The thought of not having work was unimaginable because I’d been working since I was 13. I took a risk, moving to Asia [for] greater opportunities. That was fantastic. I spent six years there, started doing resorts then master planning; the foundation of my career.

We have different types of clients participating in some of the largest projects, usually grounded in entertainment. That’s our strength, why all our sectors relate back to theme parks, water parks, mixed-use entertainment, resorts. Every project starts with basic assumptions. We bring visioning to the table in design, but there’s the pragmatic side, market understanding, who are you catering to? That helps influence scale, investment level, the land needed – all parameters. Everything’s not [about] building fun, it has to make business sense. That’s the foundation of the whole design process.

People don’t think about washrooms. We know guest behaviours, how many toilets there should be – there are various metrics we follow. Within the last five years, our designs have included baby change tables in men’s washrooms. Regardless of the country, cultural differences and whether park operations set guidelines, our designers have consciously included them. Rest areas are very important. You can’t go at the same pace the entire day. You need to plan so people can relax [in something like] a garden.

We've always got to deliver more as guests expect more. They see something amazing, then “what’s next?” It’s a constant growing expectation, never static, so there’s pressure to figure out new and more innovative ways to entertain. It keeps us on our toes as part of guest experiences – not just the attraction, but walking through space from an attraction, retail or while in a queue.

I don't think my kids think I'm cool. After they came along, I designed through their lens. They're the typical customer and inspire me. I've worked on many projects at home at night, [like] a water-park expansion; they had an idea for a winding slide I secretly worked in. When it was built, I put the renderings up in their rooms. As designers, we all have our unique skills. It's important to be nimble and multitask, deviate from your area of comfort to tailor to the client's needs. Be able to switch gears and find your niche, stand out from the crowd. That helped me. Where you have unique skills, make sure they're seen, recognized and be able to demonstrate them.

I've experienced different roles and had so many different opportunities. I never feel bored or that things are repetitive. I've never felt a low in my career here, my 20 years here are amazing. It gives me satisfaction to see our team members acknowledged for their work. In my early years, there were times I was too shy or quiet and I wasn't always recognized for my contributions. People need encouragement; our people can let their talents show and share that with clients. It makes for a stronger workplace and company.

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