Nicholas S. Gonzalez
Recreation & Community Services Director
City of Ontario Recreation & Community Services Department

How did you get your start in public service?
When I graduated from the University of La Verne following the economic downturn, I was doing everything I possibly could to find full-time employment. I was working at Starbucks at the time (hence my love for coffee) and did not have a vision for a career path to follow. What I did know was that I wanted to make a difference, work with great people, and that I was really good at providing excellent customer service. During this time, I found an opportunity to apply for a Customer Services Representative job opening for the water and trash department with the City of Ontario. A year after applying for the job, I was asked to come in for an interview and received a job offer. I accepted the job offer and told myself that I would stay in the job for only one year and then move on to another company. Three months into the job, I was given an internship opportunity to learn more about local government in the City Manager’s Office/Economic Development and that is where I discovered my passion for local government. Although it seems that I unexpectedly fell into public service, I feel like it was always my destiny. Nine years later, I am still with the City of Ontario and have been given amazing opportunities to serve the community and truly make a difference.

What are your favorite aspects about your current job?
Currently, I serve as the Recreation & Community Services Director for the City of Ontario. I LOVE my job. I get to work with a wonderful group of people, oversee several community centers, premiere sports fields, a beautiful park system, and put on amazing events, programs, and classes for the community to enjoy. Additionally, fun is our number one priority and it is great having a team that gets along and is enthusiastic about the enriching experiences we are delivering to our community each day. It is very rewarding to walk through community centers and see people laugh, build friendships, and hear their stories about how recreation staff have helped them overcome challenges in their lives.

What do you love about local government?
I truly love serving the community. Local government is rewarding in a way that allows you to witness the fruits of your labor in the communities you serve. If you are working on a new project for years and it finally breaks down and begins construction, you can physically see your hard work and dedication come to life. The idea of civic engagement is exciting in that you get to build champions for your communities to get involved in local government, participate in programs and events, and also promote all the resources and services governments provide.

What advice or inspirational quote has resonated with you over the years?

“If you can dream it, you can do it.”
-Walt Disney
This quote also reminds me that the world is filled with endless possibilities as long as you have the vision and determination to put the work into accomplishing your goals.

What does it mean to you being a person of color in your role in local government?
As a person of color and first-generation, I feel that it is my duty to show others that they can accomplish their dreams and have a successful life. As a child, I did not know of any positive role models who looked like me. My parents and siblings did their best to motivate and encourage me to be the best person I can be. As I started college and began working, I began interacting with many individuals, some people of color, who saw something in me and helped guide and push me in the right direction. I have been blessed with so many great mentors throughout my career and I hope to pay that forward by mentoring others. There are many individuals in the community whom I serve that do not have role models, so it is important to me to be a visible presence for them and connect with others.

What advice do you have for the next generation currently working in public service or looking to serve?
My advice to those who would like to work in public service is to get involved in professional development organizations. The more time you devote to your development, the more you will learn and grow. Organizations like MMASC offer a network of individuals whom you can not only engage in local government conversation with, but also establish life-long friendships with peers and mentors. Mentors who you can seek advice from will help prepare you for your next interview and so much more. I have been very fortunate to have a tribe of friends and mentors that have helped guide me to where I am today. If not for my involvement in professional development organizations, I would not have a broad perspective of local government and or its services and vast opportunities. Networking with peers helps you stay on top of the latest innovative ways local governments are engaging with their communities in our ever-changing world.

Why did you decide to get involved with ILG?
I first learned about ILG when I was Director of Communications/Secretary for the Municipal Management Association of Southern California (MMASC). I read articles about ILG, but I did not really know what the organization was truly about. Since ILG and MMASC are affiliate organizations, MMASC has a seat on the ILG Board. As I started to learn more about ILG, I began to understand how valuable this organization is for local government professionals to help understand and solve challenges faced by their communities. When the previous MMASC representative's term was ending, I immediately volunteered to take over as the representative and join the ILG Board. I wanted to be able to shepherd and tell the story of ILG to my colleagues in MMASC and let them know about all the good work ILG does in our profession.

What makes ILG special to you?
What's great about ILG is that it serves all local government leaders. Whether you are in an entry-level position trying to find information on how to deal with an issue in your community or a City Manager wanting to learn more about developing relationships with your City Council, ILG is available and ready to serve. I feel that ILG is best positioned as the repository of resources for all local government professionals but can also provide guidance and help communities find innovative ways to tackle issues in their communities.