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## The wind beneath the wings of the L.A. airport agency

In her first year back as director, Lydia Kennard has managed to get some long-delayed major projects off the ground.

By Jennifer Oldham  
Times Staff Writer

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In the shade of oak and sycamore trees, Lydia Kennard spent part of her childhood fashioning make-believe metropolises out of mud, stones and sticks outside a home her father had chiseled into a hillside near Griffith Park.

When she turned 14 she started working at her father's business, the West's oldest continuously operated African American architecture firm.

"I started running the copy machines," Kennard recalled. "Every summer I would work there, and [my dad] never coddled me; I always worked for someone else."

Today, the 52-year-old Kennard is one of the most formidable officials in Los Angeles: executive director of Los Angeles World Airports.

A lawyer and urban planner with degrees from Stanford, Harvard and MIT, she was hand-picked to run the world's fifth-busiest airport, as well as facilities in Ontario, Palmdale and Van Nuys — all essentially mini-cities with their own police and fire facilities, transportation dilemmas and aging buildings.

"She's very meticulous," said her older sister Gail, who now runs Kennard Design Group, the Los Angeles firm founded by their late father, Robert. "So I wasn't surprised at all that she went into planning, because she really inherited an appreciation for spaces and ordering things."

And she is still fond of construction materials. On her desk at Los Angeles International Airport sits a 2-pound chunk of concrete, a memento carved out of the southernmost runway, which is being moved in the first major project at LAX since preparations were made for the 1984 Olympics.

Like a big-city mayor, Kennard is often in the spotlight, as LAX garners headlines about security bans on carry-on liquids, close calls between aircraft on runways or temperamental air traffic control equipment.

At a recent luncheon, she recounted how employees at her local dry cleaners recognized her even before she gave her name.

" 'Oh, you run the airport,' " she recalled them saying. " 'We've seen you on TV.' " "

Soft-spoken and self-effacing despite her \$298,315 annual salary, Kennard also has Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's ear, and with it an opportunity to make changes in the airport system that have eluded officials for decades.

There's a story the mayor is fond of telling, about a call he placed when Kennard was a stay-at-home mom who somehow also found time to serve on numerous boards, including the Rand Corp. and California Air Resources boards:

"My first call, my absolute first call, before I was even sworn in as mayor of Los Angeles, was to Lydia," he's said repeatedly.

"I said to her, 'I need you. This airport is an engine for Southern California's economy. I need your leadership, your communication skills. I need your ability to build consensus.' " "

Villaraigosa knew Kennard held an educational pedigree matched by few other city executives. She earned a bachelor's degree at Stanford, then moved to the East Coast and studied for a master's in city planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a law degree from Harvard — at the same time.

The mayor also knew Kennard had experience, having previously held the post of executive director of airports under former mayors James K. Hahn and Richard Riordan. She was little known outside City Hall until Sept. 11, 2001, when she kept LAX's central terminal closed to private vehicles for five weeks, despite pressure from politicians, her own deputies and airline executives. Her stalwart position won praise nationwide.

Her tenure was interrupted, however, in mid-2003, when she resigned, saying she wanted to spend more time with her children, Marlyse, 11, and Bryson, 4, and her stepson, Sean, 26.

"I failed miserably," Kennard recounted in a speech earlier this year. "It's far easier to manage 3,000 people than it is to stay at home with a 3-year-old. My children didn't appreciate me when I was there every day, it was all about 'Where are my Cheerios? Where is my orange juice?' Now, they rush to the door when I get home."

Friends say there was another factor that caused her to leave: the caustic management style of then-Airport Commission President Ted Stein.

Several months later, City Controller Laura Chick announced that she had found "potential illegal acts" while conducting a routine audit of the airport department. An investigation of city contracting practices subsequently led to the resignation of Stein and of Hahn's airport deputy, Troy Edwards. The three-year inquiry ultimately led to the indictment of former Airport Commissioner Leland Wong, who has pleaded not guilty to charges of bribery and

conflict of interest.

Even though she was untouched by the scandal, Kennard said her friends, some of whom she's hung out with since nursery school, thought she was crazy to return to the city in October 2005. But she said she felt compelled to go back, citing "unfinished business."

Jack Driscoll, an aviation consultant who headed the agency from 1992 to 1999, initially hired Kennard in part to help him figure out how to modernize LAX through a new master plan.

"It's kind of funny because she started out with the master plan, and after a number of years she comes back and she solves our master planning problem," Driscoll said. "You think of how many years it took to get to that, and in a matter of months she closed the deal."

Precisely, it took 12 years, \$150 million and blueprints designed under three mayoral administrations, but Kennard resolved the modernization stalemate in a matter of days last winter by crafting a deal with surrounding communities that lets LAX build several projects.

A host of lawsuits had threatened to derail the runway project and others in Hahn's controversial \$11-billion LAX modernization plan.

The settlement Kennard brokered requires airport officials to shelve Hahn's proposal and start over.

Kennard's compromise generated, for the first time in decades, some goodwill in airport-area communities. It also allowed the agency to begin the \$333-million south runway project, a \$723-million refurbishment of the Tom Bradley International Terminal and a \$390-million overhaul of LAX's baggage system.

"L.A. has some of the toughest political challenges in the nation," said FAA Administrator Marion Blakey. "It needs someone like Lydia, who is trusted and respected by those community groups."

Those relationships will be tested this winter when Kennard unveils a new plan to modernize LAX. It may include elements long despised by residents, such as moving the north runway a little closer to homes.

It's difficult to find anyone who is at odds with Kennard. In fact, she is so comfortable with her standing that she recently ribbed Airport Commission Vice President Valeria C. Velasco, who represents residents, by saying she wanted a piece of the north runway on her desk soon too.

Kennard lives in Altadena, on an estate she remodeled with her husband, Sammi Reeves, an electrical engineer who runs a construction management firm. The almost one-acre parcel features a step-down backyard with a swimming pool, a tennis court and massive oak trees.

In her spare time, Kennard aspires to take piano lessons and join an over-40 women's soccer league. She's also writing a book with the working title "Testosterone Wars," which will feature lighthearted stories about women thrust into male-dominated professions. The book

will include a chapter devoted to her experiences at LAX after 9/11.

"It was hard for me during 9/11 to translate some of the things that were happening and how men were in a different kind of communication level than I was, and still are," Kennard recalled recently. "If someone says 'you rope-a-doped him' " — a tactic used by boxer Muhammad Ali — "and you're standing there and you don't know what it is you missed, the whole context is lost."

Now, as she directs an organization with 3,300 employees and a \$1.2-billion annual budget, Kennard must coordinate with officials in three cities and two counties, as well as state and federal lawmakers and agencies.

The mayor wants her to move air traffic to Ontario and Palmdale. City Councilman Bill Rosendahl wants her to figure out how to get the Metro Green Line to LAX. The FAA wants her to make LAX's north airfield safer.

Aviation officials agree that the unflappable Kennard is up for the challenges.

"Talk about everything in a package — Lydia's got it," said Driscoll. "There was nothing that Lydia touched that didn't end up going in the right direction."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Airports soaring

In the year since she returned to the city's airport agency, Lydia Kennard has aggressively tackled projects that officials tried to get off the ground for years. Her accomplishments are detailed in a 20-page spreadsheet, including:

- Creating an advertising program for Los Angeles and Ontario international airports.
- Refurbishing LAX's outdated Terminal 3.
- Developing a plan to improve restaurants and retail outlets at LAX.
- Establishing an ethics office.
- Installing new technology to illuminate light towers lining the entrance to LAX.

- Opening a park-and-ride facility at Union Station that buses passengers to LAX.
- Offering opportunities for LAX travelers to check their bags at several off-site locations.

Source: Los Angeles World Airports

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