

# STORIES FROM THE WALKING COLLEGE: EVREN SÖNMEZ

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***“It’s not just a transportation issue, but a matter of health and quality of life, as well as accessibility and opportunity.”***

Evren Sönmez shared her perspective on the impact of her job as a Program Manager at Living Streets Alliance (LSA).

In her extensive work with walkability in Tucson, Arizona, Evren tries to keep the multifaceted nature of the movement in mind. A Tucson-based nonprofit organization, LSA envisions streets as living public spaces that connect people to places and to each other. Along with the rest of LSA, Evren advocates for a thriving Tucson by creating great streets for everyone. While pursuing this mission, she likes to focus on meaningfully engaging the community and working with the City of Tucson to promote more collaborative, inclusive, and equitable community engagement practices.

## ***From Ankara, Turkey to Tucson, Arizona***

Juxtaposing the transportation modalities of her hometown of Ankara, Turkey with those of her current city of residence, Evren described how different Tucson is when it came to walkability. Having grown up in Ankara (a much bigger city than Tucson) she was really accustomed to walking and taking public transit, which made life much easier and afforded her a lot of independence growing up. “I was rather shocked when I came to Tucson, seeing the empty streets and realizing that most people were very car-dependent,” she said.

From a walkable communities perspective, she points out that you can build shiny new sidewalks complete with beautiful landscaping, public art, etc., and yet if there are no destinations to walk to or if the development patterns are such that grocery stores, restaurants, and other everyday destinations are all tucked away in strip malls with giant parking lots out front, those sidewalks will remain largely empty. In contrast, Ankara’s streets are flooded with people walking all the time despite the uneven pavement, tree roots buckling the concrete, and numerous other obstacles, simply because there are so many places to get to on foot with their front doors right up against the sidewalks.





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These are obviously serious issues that need to be fixed to make the sidewalks accessible to all people, including those traveling in wheelchairs or utilizing assistive technology, but it highlights the importance of the 'land use' piece in terms of creating an urban environment where people will walk and move. Evren's motivation within this movement is summed up in one simple statement: "Everybody walks. Walkability is a part of everything [we] do. And everything we do is about people." Not only that, but walkable community designs are particularly important to her because, she says, "walking is good for us, the earth, local businesses, and our neighborhoods."

This most basic form of transportation, sadly, has been designed out of many American cities. Around the world, many cities build their streets, the most abundant form of their public space, to improve the quality of life of their inhabitants.

We can re-imagine our streets if we embrace the simple philosophy of 'streets for people.' She's passionate about playing a part in this transformation that would center people in designing streets and public spaces so that people become healthier, happier, and more engaged in their communities, and can travel where they need to go with dignity and joy.



### ***From Walking College to Walkable Communities***

Prior to the Walking College, Evren Sönmez had already worked for LSA for three years, focusing on Neighborhood Walkability Assessments, hosting events to raise awareness of walkability issues, and helping initiate the Safe Routes to School program in Tucson. She also collaborated with colleagues at the University of Arizona on a CDC-funded project investigating perceptions of walkability and barriers to active transportation in Tucson's Latino/Latinx neighborhoods. However, Evren applied for a Walking College Fellowship to better her abilities as an advocate.

***“When I participated in the Walking College, I hoped to acquire additional skills to carry out successful campaigns to make Tucson a better place to walk and learn about effective ways to enable local policy change that prioritizes the human footprint while working with diverse groups of individuals and organizations.”***

At the time she joined the Walking College, Evren was in the process of preparing and campaigning for LSA’s “Pedestrian Safety and Comfort Bond Proposal” for Pima County’s bond election in 2015. Although the bond did not end up passing, she realized that there was a lot of support for these walkability initiatives. She began to wonder how to carry it forward, so that the support did not simply fizzle out.

When Evren created her Walking Action Plan for the Walking College, she began her work to convene a Walkability Summit in Tucson to build on the momentum and the alliances created during the bond campaign and turn it into a broader, stronger walkability movement that would represent the collective vision of a community of diverse and engaged stakeholders. As a result, Complete Streets come out as a policy initiative that people were interested in pursuing.

Although Evren found the resources shared through the Walking College to be valuable, the biggest benefit, in her view, was the connections with other people in the same line of work. She found people with similar passions and discovered that there were many other people and places facing issues similar to the ones that she was trying to resolve. In other words, for Evren, the Walking College facilitated the formation of a mutually supporting “community of practice.”



Photo credit: Scott Griessel

## ***Beyond the Classroom***

In February 2019, Tucson’s Mayor and Council unanimously adopted a Complete Streets policy. This was the culmination of a two-year collaborative process spearheaded by LSA. While leading and overseeing this initiative Evren believed that the process was just as important as the outcomes.

In partnership with Tucson Department of Transportation & Mobility, LSA convened a Complete Streets Task Force where Evren worked with advocates from affordable housing, disability, environmental organizations, public transit, and public health. Such widespread collaboration again reflects the multifaceted nature of this movement.

In terms of community engagement, recognizing the shortcomings of traditional avenues of engagement like open houses and public meetings, LSA adopted strategies focused on meeting people where they are and bringing different voices into the Complete Streets conversation. To that end, Evren and her team hosted “Rethinking Streets”, community dialogues with diverse communities who are traditionally left out of government planning and decision-making processes.

Additionally, working with two youth partners, LSA set up pop-up engagements at everyday community destinations and layered a lot of different programs over the years, building relationships and trust within the Tucson community. The challenges that Sönmez helps to tackle grow out of community concerns and these long- term relationships with the people that live and work in these areas.

During the policy process, Tucson’s first tactical urbanism project with paint, planters, and posts took place transforming an intersection in a commercial district where local businesses had been observing a need for safety improvements. This led to lots of excitement and conversation around what Complete Streets might look like on the ground and generated a lot of interest in similar quick-build street treatments among other neighborhoods.

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In particular, she enjoyed discussing the street transformation projects, where LSA closely works with neighborhoods and school communities to help identify their traffic calming needs and community members create art pieces such as traffic circles with murals featuring neighborhood stories or symbols that celebrate their community.

Evren worked to assist in increased transparency with these projects between the city and the community. Additionally, she has been pushing for a paradigm shift within government organizations. In their ongoing work, many government agencies are not accustomed to operating in favor of more equitable community engagement. When reflecting on the community's wishes, she “consider[s] who's at the table and who's not at the table—whose voices are being heard and whose not being heard.” She would also like to see municipal project budgets and timelines to better reflect the time and the resources to facilitate authentic, not check-the-box, engagement.

Also, Tucson—like most cities—is car-oriented, and out of convenience, many funds are getting allocated towards projects such as widening streets that prioritize driving at the expense of moving and walking. These structural and cultural foundations require systemic changes and infrastructure improvements in order to shift more towards communities and ensure that implementation is equitable. Evren has opened conversations and helped shift peoples' mindsets towards such considerations.

Evren Sönmez's main goal going forward is to keep working on community-led policy initiatives and street transformations while broadening partnerships and collaborations. She wishes to continue advancing the Complete Streets initiative along with her other important work at Living Streets Alliance.



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