

Alumna leads USC Government Relations

By Eddie North-Hager

May 14, 2013

Former California state Sen. Martha Escutia's eyes welled up with tears recently as she remembered one of her last nights as a USC undergraduate studying public policy in 1979.

Escutia, a self-described "scholarship kid from East LA," had a full-tuition scholarship to study law at Georgetown University but worried about whether she could afford rent in Washington, D.C.

Shortly before commencement, professors from the then-School of Public Administration took her out for a farewell dinner and presented her with an envelope. She was shocked to find a \$2,000 check inside: They had taken a collection for their star pupil.

"Thirtysomething years later, I'm still touched," Escutia said. "Coming back here is bringing back great memories."

It was a wise investment for the university. Escutia went on to serve 14 years in the California Legislature and now returns to her alma mater as vice president of USC Government Relations.

Escutia, who started on May 1, will represent USC's core academic and public affairs interests and communicate the breadth and depth of the university's research activities to officials at the national, state and local levels.

"Martha Escutia has dedicated her life to public service, and we are proud that USC was there at the very beginning," said Thomas S. Sayles, USC senior vice president of University Relations. "Now she will use her talents to represent USC."

Escutia was a member of the California Senate from 1998 to 2006 and a member of the California Assembly from 1992 to 1998. She was the first woman to chair both the Assembly and Senate Judiciary Committees.

Known for her innovative leadership and consensus building, she passed legislation to rid schools of junk foods and ensured access to the court system for the poor and most vulnerable. She developed the first self-help centers to assist unrepresented victims of negligence, abuse and fraud, and she helped to ensure that children would have their own court-appointed advocates, especially in contentious child custody cases.

Prior to joining USC, Escutia was a partner at The Senators Firm, a law and consulting firm she co-founded. She also served as a partner in the national law firm of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips.

Throughout her career, Escutia has been lauded for her work as a public servant and a litigator. She was honored with the 2010 John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award by the Los Angeles County Democratic Party and the 2007 Commitment to Justice Award by the California Supreme Court, among other accolades.

She was a guest lecturer at the USC Price School of Public Policy and an adjunct professor in the political science department at East Los Angeles College. She currently serves on the board of the California Emerging Technology Fund, a \$100-million fund aimed at bridging the digital divide. As a volunteer trainer for the U.S. Agency for International Development, Escutia trained female legislators in Bolivia.

"I feel like my life has come full circle," Escutia said. "How could I not come back?"

