

# The Great Encourager

**“If you give of yourself by becoming an officer or active member, you get the chance to affect change. When this occurs, growth follows and you become a more vital person. I encourage people not to settle for less!”**

**-Bill Medley, SR/WA**



## BY BARBARA BILLITZER

Throughout the Association’s history, local chapters have been considered the lifeblood of IRWA. It is through the commitment of chapter volunteers that IRWA is able to bring education to the local level, where members and other right of way professionals can meet, share their unique project challenges, and pursue professional development growth and advancement. Chapters work toward a common goal – serving the needs of their members. It is this common purpose that has enabled the Association to advance the right of way profession for more than 75 years.

### The Chapter that Could

Tennessee Chapter 32 is a high performer. Not because they cover a large area or have a vast membership. In fact, with only 63 members, they rank near the lower third. However, in terms of the number of classes they present—nine in the past year—they rank in the top 13.

The chapter’s unique ability to attract an average of 24 class attendees has placed them in a category of their own. While other chapters are working hard to keep attendance from slipping, this chapter has generated 50 percent more participants to every class. The Tennessee Chapter also ranks high when it comes to generosity. At the 2009 Annual Education Conference in Indianapolis, they donated \$10,000 to the Right of Way Education Foundation, one of the largest amounts donated by a single chapter.

So what does this chapter attribute to such high performance, especially in light of these belt-tightening economic times? Chapter 32 has a secret weapon. His name is Bill Medley, SR/WA, and he is a man on a mission.

### Man on a Mission

When it comes to gauging the education needs of Chapter 32’s members, Bill Medley, SR/WA, uses a common sense approach. “We consistently survey and ask our members about their needs

*Photography by Carl Krockenberger*

and interests so we can schedule those courses that meet those needs. We have made it our top priority to help our members move forward on the path toward earning their certifications and designations,” explains Bill.

Bill feels compelled to help anyone who shows interest in advancing, and speaks with pride about those he was fortunate enough to have mentored over the years. His recent success story is Amy Reeves, who currently works for one of his previous employers, the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT).

As Bill recalls, “In 2004, Amy attended her first chapter meeting and told me how inspired she was by the professionals she met. Shortly after, she expressed her desire to earn the SR/WA designation. I told her that her first was to become an IRWA member, so she joined, despite the fact that her employer did not reimburse for membership fees. After she took that first step, I sat down with her and we mapped out the courses she would need to take to earn the SR/WA. Today, I’m proud to say that she is not only our Chapter Vice President, she was recently recognized as Chapter 32’s Professional of the Year.

## The Changing Landscape

When Bill first became actively involved in his chapter back in the early 1990s, it was enjoying enormous success. Having started his career at TDOT as a review appraiser just a few years earlier, his managers, Howard Harper and Rex Jenkins, were both IRWA members and actively involved in chapter activities. They encouraged the review appraisers and contractors to advance in their careers through education. Bill realized that membership in the Association would be an important career move, and he joined in 1992. “I was especially impressed by the people and level of professional education offered by the local chapter,” he recalls. “I wanted to become actively involved right away, so I started at the bottom and worked my way up. I really wanted to advance myself by getting a better education, and I have enjoyed the benefits of those efforts, along with great friendships and advanced pay. The chance to change things for the better has been the true hook for me.”

During his early years with TDOT, Bill recalls being self-motivated and full of new ideas. However, some environments are not as receptive as others, and he found himself frustrated by the status quo. Ready for a bigger challenge and the opportunity to make a difference, he joined the Comptroller of the Treasury as the Appraisal Supervisor for the Office of State Assessed Properties, where he remains today.

Allocating funds for education has changed dramatically over time. Bill’s current director is a past International President of the International Association of Assessing Officers. For the first few years, he fully supported education and encouraged his staff to achieve a designation and attend as many meetings and conferences as possible. While serving as Chapter President, Bill’s travel expenses were covered by the chapter. Following his term, his boss was able to fund the cost of meetings and conferences. But with today’s current budget restrictions, it’s no longer possible to get reimbursed for those expenses. Bill understands the realities of the budget cuts and now pays for his expenses out of pocket. He believes it is worth the investment.

## Call to Action

Despite the country’s stimulus package, U.S. agency budgets are still tight. Like most states, the Tennessee state budget is balanced on an annual basis. Recent revenue losses have led them into the red, which means that everyone on staff is locked-in to their current salary. Budgets for travel and education have been slashed. Until the revenue situation improves, opportunities for advancement and salary increases are not viable.

The effects of downsizing and budget cuts have taken their toll at the local chapter level. While Chapter 32’s members continued seeking educational venues, a lack of employer funding had created some serious hurdles. The chapter no longer had the backing of TDOT educational funding, one of their largest supporters. Over time, chapter leadership interest waned and very few courses were being scheduled or presented. This left the chapter in a distressed financial situation.



In his true element, Bill’s most creative ideas surface while fishing and hunting.



At the infamous Legends Corner in Nashville, TN, Bill jams with the Dave Parker Band.

The chapter knew they needed someone who could get things active again. So they contacted Bill to see if he would consider coming back as the Chapter Education Chair. Recognizing the opportunity to put his ideas into action, he jumped at the chance to help the chapter turn things around.

## A Plan Evolves

Bill's first move was to get to the top tier of TDOT's leadership. He contacted the Chief Engineer and asked him why TDOT no longer supported education for their employees. The answer was quite simple. Apparently, the previous administration did not think education was important for their staff. Bill was able to explain how the lack of education and training was now contributing to a new problem – a lack of professionalism and motivation among the current employees. Bill was persuasive. They acknowledged the problem and agreed that education did play an important role. As a result, their new Human Resource Director contacted Bill to get things started again.

The next step was to devise a schedule that would include the specific course interests of TDOT. The chapter agreed to present as many courses as the agency needed, as long as they were well attended. This meant the TDOT would need to ensure a minimum number of students and a convenient location, which they did. Bill also took over the responsibility for the chapter newsletter and began announcing the courses many months in advance so that members could plan ahead. He even sent course announcements to other organizations and established a way to earn multiple credits for continuing education.

Recently, Bill began using one of the informational tools offered by IRWA - a list of all past courses attended by their chapter members. He asked TDOT and other local utility

companies to find out what their employees needed in continuing education. With that information in hand, the chapter was able to target the courses to the needs of members and other course attendees. This simple process ensured their sure-fire success in helping members complete the requirements for IRWA certifications and SR/WA designation. The Association recently published new roadmaps for achieving certification and designation, and by distributing these at chapter meetings and courses, Bill expects to see a bounty of members setting their sights on achieving their credentials.

## Attracting More Participants

Bill explains that, since the majority of chapter members have been around for a long time, they have already taken most of the IRWA courses, in some cases multiple times. He admits that in most of today's classes, typically only 10 percent are IRWA members. In some cases, the courses are attended entirely by non-members.

To generate more course participants, Bill applied for continuing education credits from the Tennessee Real Estate Appraisal Commission. Getting their approval was not as difficult as originally imagined. Even though there was a \$200 application fee for each course, he felt confident that the number of attendees would more than cover the cost. And because IRWA courses were approved by the Tennessee Real Estate Appraisers Commission, the state appraisers could attend courses that were not previously included in their curriculum. This collaborative effort generated enormous benefits for both parties, and the fact that ten of the last thirteen Appraisal Commissioners were IRWA members is evidence of this.

A big draw for members is the quarterly chapter meeting where they are guaranteed a good meal, important networking opportunities, a raffle giveaway and a notable guest speaker. Primarily attended by members, these quarterly meetings are one of the key reasons why members continue to renew their membership year after year. While they may not be attending the courses presented, they continue to support the Association through their annual dues and take advantage of hearing new topics presented by distinguished speakers.

## Proactive Approach

When asked about implementing some of his other creative ideas, he boasts that the chapter recently launched a new Certification and Designation Incentive Program. For the 2010 calendar year, they are offering any active member and non-member the opportunity to receive a free one-year membership in IRWA by completing the course work and exam to receive

their certification or SR/WA designation. “Our goal is to reward those who accomplish their certification or designation. While the program is limited to the first 25 applicants, we hope to see a strong increase in our chapter credentialing numbers. We also hope to reap a bounty of satisfied members and possibly attract some new members from TDOT,” notes Bill.

The chapter also identifies which topics warrant more in-depth coverage and hosts seminars on hot topics of interest to those in the field, such as The ABC’s of Wireless Easements, which attracted 150 participants. These topical seminars attract a diverse group of professionals and range of differing viewpoints. When there’s lively discussion following the presentation, the chapter knows they are on the right track. The Evolution of Railroads was determined to be a hot topic, so the chapter presented this as a session at their Region’s Spring Forum in 2007.

The chapter is always searching for new companies and organizations where they might find potential students. According to Bill, “I was really pleased when we were able to present on-site contract courses to our local utility companies. It all started with a request from Memphis Light Gas and Water of Memphis (MLG&W), who asked that we schedule courses 200, 800 and 900 for their staff. We had already scheduled courses at the four regional TDOT auditoriums, however they were under travel restrictions and unable to attend. I was on the phone with Heather Morris, IRWA’s Chapter Education and Relationship Manager, and she suggested that we connect the DOTs with the MLG&W and schedule a contract course at their location in Memphis.

This was a blessing for our chapter members and MLG&W. It has worked out for both parties as well as the Association.”

## Sense of Pride

Being recognized as a true professional has given Bill great pride and a sense of accomplishment. Over the years, he has been named Chapter Professional of the Year twice and honored last year as the Region 6 Professional of the Year. He makes it a point to give an introduction at the beginning of each class or seminar. “I usually share on the importance of professionalism and what it has meant to me. I think this goes a long way in validating the role that education plays in helping those who want to advance in their careers.”

The personal touch also goes a long way, and Bill will often make personal calls to anyone he thinks might benefit from a chapter meeting or IRWA course. Essentially, he lets them know that there is absolutely no reason not to attend!

“I like to kick off each meeting or course with a little story about a guy working for TDOT who was going nowhere quick by sitting back and waiting for someone else to do things for him,” says Bill. “Today, I have both my SR/WA Designation and an Appraisal License. I am convinced that we are only held back by our own lack of focus. In reality, the sky is the limit.”

It’s easy to see how Bill has earned his reputation for being “The Great Encourager.” Like others who have experienced the good fortune of crossing paths with him, I feel inspired to do more; be more.



Collaborating with his team at the Office of State Assessed Properties, from left, Austin Thompson, Shannon Tucker, Bill, Pat Dodson and Gary Harris.