

AN INTERVIEW WITH IRWA INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT PATRICIA PETITTO, SR/WA, R/W-RAC



BY BARBARA BILLITZER

When it comes to serving as a role model for volunteerism, Pat Petitto has undoubtedly led by example. Throughout her 28-year relationship with IRWA, Pat has served in almost every position at every level. With an unwavering commitment to the Association, and a passion for professional development, she plans to stay focused on the big picture as she assumes the role of International President.

You have volunteered much of your time to IRWA. What has been your most rewarding experience?

I have thoroughly enjoyed serving at the chapter, region, and international levels, but I would say that my favorite role was serving on the International Professional Development Committee. I first got involved in course coordinating and professional development at the chapter level, so this was an area where I thought I could really make a difference.

Having a common focus – to maintain high standards of competency through professional development – was such a collaborative experience for me. All of us on the committee worked very hard, yet our time together was always so enjoyable. Probably one of the reasons I stayed on the committee for 10 years was because it was so rewarding to help develop the curriculum for training right of way practitioners. It was difficult for me to leave, but I now see that our best leaders benefit from having new experiences. That's why we encourage so many of our volunteers to get involved in so many different capacities.

What do you see as the greatest benefit to being an IRWA member?

The benefits are endless. For me, the greatest advantage is knowing that if I have a question, IRWA members will always help me. All I have to do is call or email, and I will get an answer. Membership is what helps us all stay connected and provides a way to keep current on the changing trends in right of way. The opportunity to advance ourselves with a certification or designation is another benefit, and of course, the networking opportunities are invaluable.

What has been your biggest challenge while serving on the International Executive Committee?

I think the biggest challenge with any group is working as a cohesive team and staying focused on the priorities. With one member leaving and one member joining each year, the team dynamics are in a constant state of change. Everyone brings different strengths to the IEC. I don't think it is possible for one person to know everything and do everything, so it's essential that we have a shared vision. Beyond that, we have also learned to respect our differences and trust each other, and this has trickled down to the region, chapter and committee levels as well.

What role has education played in your career?

Throughout my career, education has played a major role. I am continuously taking courses to maintain my SR/WA designation, my relocation certification, my broker's license and my appraisal license. Sometimes I will take a course just because it is new or being sponsored by my chapter. I am fortunate in that I've had the opportunity to take nearly every course that IRWA offers, as well as numerous courses from other associations. In addition to the learning experience, attending all of these courses has provided me with some great networking opportunities. Many of my closest friendships evolved after taking a class together. While I have learned a great deal through on-the-job training, I can't imagine being where I am today without all of courses I have taken.

What major changes do you anticipate in our industry over the coming years?

Many of the nation's challenges are associated with our aging infrastructure and the need to improve safety while repairing and rebuilding. Fortunately, in July 2012, President Obama signed into law the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21). This new law funds surface transportation programs at over \$105 billion for fiscal years 2013 and 2014, and serves as the first long-term highway authorization enacted since 2005. The bill creates a streamlined, performance-based and multimodal program to address the many issues facing the U.S. transportation system. This will help the Federal Highway Administration continue their work with stakeholders to ensure that local communities are able to build multimodal, sustainable projects ranging from passenger rail and transit to bicycle and pedestrian paths.

Furthermore, enormous growth in pipeline development has triggered changes in the right of way industry. Right of way professionals must be prepared to deal with rapid expansion, changing landowner expectations, fluctuating business conditions and regulatory uncertainty. Research has led to predictions that employment in unconventional natural gas

projects is predicted to grow to 1.5 million jobs by 2015 and to more than 2.4 million by 2035.

We are also seeing significant potential for expanding the Association on an international level. Many of our engineering firms and members are already doing business outside of North America. Likewise, engineering firms headquartered overseas are working on infrastructure projects in the U.S. and Canada.

As President, what are some of your most immediate priorities?

Continuing to focus on increasing the value of IRWA membership is number one. We want to serve, retain and recruit members, and we can do this by creating a business advantage. That means adding more interactive educational opportunities and other ways to connect our members with each other. We also want to become more proactive in disseminating information on markets, issues and trends.

Another major priority is to enhance the perceived value of IRWA's credentials in the marketplace. Increasing our influence is essential, and we can do this by marketing the professional advantages that our members bring to the users of our services. In addition to developing new courses and programs, we hope to add some new certifications and designations. Our new Generalist Career Path is gaining interest and the overall count of designated and certified members is increasing. A lot has been accomplished by our Experience, Specialty and Instructor Task Forces and I expect that we will continue to see advancements in the upcoming year.



An active member of Michigan Chapter 7 for over 25 years, Pat took over the role of Chapter President in 1994 from outgoing Chapter President, Randy Hansen.

Gaining annual exposure for the right of way profession is essential, and the annual Project of the Year Competition has helped us garner significant news media attention. Targeted advertising to the engineering community will also be a top priority this year. Right of Way Magazine continues to evolve its content and the online version is now being shared with the users of right of way services as a marketing tool.

What do you hope to accomplish during your term as President?

Few individual goals can be accomplished in one year. I hope to work on the readily achievable parts of our strategic plan, including enhancing the benefits of IRWA membership, raising the quality and perceived value of IRWA education and credentials, and expanding IRWA's external marketing efforts. I also hope we can continue our momentum of international growth while continuing to work with our chapters, regions and committees to share ideas and solve problems together. I am looking forward to launching the leadership succession plan and a leadership orientation program, as well as continuing the work of our Leadership Institute.

Where do you see the most growth potential for IRWA?

IRWA continues to expand internationally, primarily because that is where a lot of the demand for our courses and certifications is coming from. The South Africa Right of Way

Association became a chapter in 2011 after many years as an affiliate, and it has already grown to 119 members. They are also promoting IRWA to several adjoining countries in Africa. At our latest conference in Seattle, we had representatives from Japan, Thailand, Uganda, the United Kingdom, Germany and Saudi Aramco. They all provide huge opportunities for growth.

In North America, I see a potential for high growth in the pipeline and utility industries. We will also continue to actively pursue and develop more agency memberships, as these help us to secure credentialing and education commitments.

How would you describe the benefits of giving back to ones profession?

My first volunteer job with IRWA was as my Chapter's Newsletter Editor. I was advised to always include the Teddy Roosevelt quote, "Every man owes some of his time to the upbuilding of the profession to which he belongs" on the front page of every newsletter. (I always thought that if Teddy were around today, he would have probably included women in this quote.)

It took me a while to realize that right of way is my profession and not just something I was doing to earn a paycheck, but something I genuinely enjoyed and wanted to turn into a career. That meant not just getting involved, but giving back. For me, the benefits include countless learning experiences and the satisfaction that comes from encouraging others. By getting involved and taking an active interest in developing the skills of others, I have managed to build a large network of fellow right of way professionals I now consider friends. In addition, the business development opportunities have proven to be fairly effortless as a result.

Today I find it rewarding to see members whom I have encouraged, enjoying the experience of serving in various leadership capacities.

What would you say about right of way as a career to someone just entering the workforce?

If you enjoy working on a variety of projects, solving problems and talking to people, then right of way is a good career choice. When you think about it, right of way touches so many areas of our lives. From new roads and airports to transit, water, utilities, communications, and pipelines, the list is endless. I have found that the most difficult projects are often the most rewarding to work on. There is so much to learn and every project brings new experiences and growth.



In 2003, Pat received the Frank C. Balfour Professional of the Year Award from International President Albert Allen, SR/WA.

Throughout your career and leadership roles, you were raising two children. How were you able to balance all these roles?

It's essential to have the support of your employer and family. My job enabled me to accrue a lot of vacation time, and because my husband was a school administrator, he was home for several months in the summer. Fortunately, our kids were rarely sick, but if they were, we took turns missing work to keep them at home. We kept a calendar with important meetings and appointments, and had a great backup system of family, friends and neighbors that were there to help out if we needed them. I organized carpools for many of their activities so I wouldn't have to leave work early every day. Occasionally, we had to miss a school activity or sporting event, but we were there for the majority of them.

Of course there were some days when the schedule was too tight to get home between activities, so I kept a blanket in my car in case one of them needed to change into a uniform while we went to a drive-through for dinner. On the flip side, our kids were lucky in that they had opportunities that other kids didn't have. After their first IRWA conference, they asked to come every year, and either one or the other has attended conferences in Minneapolis, Vancouver, Mobile, Kansas City, Denver, Sacramento, Philadelphia, Toronto, Austin, Indianapolis and Seattle.



A vital support system, Pat's family has attended many annual conferences. Pictured in 2009, from left, son-in-law Paul Szczechura, Pat's daughter Sandra Szczechura, husband John and son Matt.

How can we motivate potential leaders to get more involved in shaping the future of their profession?

First, set a good example. Second, tell others about your experiences and ask them to get involved. I was fortunate that my employer was always very supportive of my involvement in IRWA. My chapter had strong leaders who encouraged me, asked me to volunteer and lead by example.

Prior to working in right of way, I belonged to another professional association but never took the time to get involved. I attended a few luncheon meetings each year with my coworkers, but we usually sat together and never took the time to volunteer, let alone meet new people. At the time, everyone saw it as a free lunch and a day away from the office. Being the new person, I followed their lead and never made much of an effort to contribute. Looking back, I didn't learn very much and have often wondered whether that experience would have been different if I had made the same effort that I have made with IRWA.

A healthy organization needs a variety of members. I believe it says something very positive about IRWA when you look at the number of young professionals getting involved while at the same time, so many of our seasoned Advisory Council members continue to participate. Our Association is built on a foundation of volunteerism, and with this kind of commitment from members of all ages and professional levels, IRWA will continue to grow and expand in the years ahead. I'm really excited to be such an integral part of that growth this year and am looking forward to my time as International President.



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