

Interview with Sandy Grigg, SR/WA

International President Sandy Grigg believes that there is a leader inside each of us, just waiting to emerge. A sense of professional pride – his underlying foundation – will set the stage for attracting the next generation of professionals, while encouraging more members to pick up the baton.

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

As I look back, it's really some of the small but meaningful experiences that come to mind. For example, I recall the first time someone came up to me and said that I probably wouldn't remember him, but he had once called me for advice which had really helped him. He told me that he never forgot it. On another occasion, a member introduced me to his spouse by saying I had made his conference experience a little more enjoyable. Although some of these may seem small or insignificant, it's those kinds of memories that have been so rewarding because they have validated my "I work for the membership" leadership approach.

What originally attracted you to the right of way profession?

Before I got into it, I had no idea what the right of way profession was. I got swept up into this right of way niche and found it to be unbelievably diverse. I like

things that are different, and every project I was involved with was unique, even at the junior level. I also love a good challenge, and this is a profession that allows you to challenge yourself and solve different problems. You get the opportunity to learn from your experiences, your mistakes and from other people. I have been doing this for over 35 years, and I am still learning!

What led you to become an IRWA member?

When I first started in this profession, I was approached by the late Bill West who quietly suggested that I join the organization. As I was just starting my career, Bill was always a good source for advice, and I soon discovered that other members of IRWA and Chapter 29 would go out of their way to help anyone in this profession. People like Bob Alstrom and Bill Dee were instrumental in my development in right of way, as well as my involvement in chapter and Association leadership. I will always be grateful for the advice and guidance of these three individuals.

BY BARBARA BILLITZER

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

For me, it is the opportunity and privilege of being part of a huge pool of experts. I have access to more than 8,000 members that I can contact for advice and guidance. For example, it is so great knowing that I can pick up the phone and call Donnie Sherwood or email him with appraisal and value questions. I can rely on quick and thoughtful responses that will help me conduct my business. The same goes for other IEC members and people like Jim Finnegan and the late Howard Armstrong, who always had time to talk. It is the members of the organization that keeps this spirit alive.

What has been your most challenging experience as a right of way professional?

To be honest, my most challenging experience has been dealing with non-right of way professionals who assume that what we do plays a minor role in the overall scheme of things. Most people do not understand the complexity of our role in any given project. They perceive right of way to be an easy process and oftentimes,

they will create unrealistic schedules. They fail to realize that we interact with all aspects of a project, and that we can be an invaluable resource if they would simply keep us involved throughout the entire process.

What role has education played in your right of way professional career?

Education has been paramount to any success I have enjoyed. IRWA courses and relevant courses offered by others have helped me to succeed. You should never stop learning no matter how old you are. The key factor I have noticed is that our members get it. And it's not only that you continue to learn, but that you can actually teach others just by telling your war stories and experiences.

What has been your biggest challenge during your five years on the IEC?

It has been coming to grips with what I can and cannot do. It comes from the realization that we all play a role in a never-ending process where you contribute rather than create, and that you are part of a team with a common goal. I have come to terms with the fact that, while I may not be around to see



Sharing the limelight with wife of 35 years, Susan, his bride and joy.

the final outcome of a project, I have an enormous sense of pride because I helped "make it happen."

How would you describe the benefits of giving back to one's profession?

In addition to gaining a sense of pride and accomplishment, I believe the biggest benefit comes from developing a mutual understanding and respect for what we do. It's the sense of accomplishment that comes from being able to look at someone else in the profession with the realization that what you do is important. And that you made a difference.

How can we motivate potential leaders to get more involved in IRWA chapters and committees?

I truly believe that each and every member has the inner drive and ability to become one of our organization's leaders. I encourage more members to pick up the baton. It is not the winning or losing that matters; it is the fact that you tried. If we continue to elevate our level of professionalism and reinforce a





much time figuring out how something is done, volunteers may get frustrated. This is counter-productive. We have come to recognize that not everyone has the same level of problem-solving experience. By outlining and documenting the process in advance, we enable our volunteers to focus on the actual assignment. This makes it more rewarding and fun. If we can direct all of our energies to the task—instead of the administration of the task—then everyone wins.

What do you think is the Association’s most untapped resource?

That is easy - our members. All we need to do is to give them the opportunity - the sky is the limit. So many really want to contribute. We challenged the Region Chairs to take a larger role in the decision-making process and they rose to the challenge. So now we need to really explore our potential and give more members the opportunity to engage, not by just by doing what they do, but by being part of the bigger picture. All oars in the water!

sense of pride as right of way professionals, then more young people starting in the field will want to get involved knowing it will enhance their status. The younger generations will hopefully see the value in what we do and want to get involved to help grow the profession, as it can certainly benefit them in the future.

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

My priorities are very simple – to make sure that our infrastructure is keeping up with our progress. The way we conduct business must match the evolving nature of our education, partnering and leadership efforts. We need to make

sure everyone in a leadership role understands how their role fits into the entire process. The actual process itself is the key.

Why is “process” so important?

Oftentimes we ask our volunteers to do something without giving them guidance in “how to do it.” We make assumptions that everyone knows how to solve problems or how to get information just because we do. If it takes too



From left, son-in-law John, granddaughter Kaitlyn, daughter Amy, Susan, granddaughter Rachel, grandson Nicholas, daughter-in-law Olympia and Darrin, Sandy’s son.

We've heard you use the term "horizontal integration." What is it and why is it important?

Think of it as collaboration across the board. The nature of our profession requires us to interact with a full range of disciplines, and each may have a completely different perspective on a project. Consider the different issues facing an appraiser or engineer versus those of a project manager or property owner. Horizontal integration helps us understand all the viewpoints, opinions, objectives and obstacles and look at them collectively, rather than one at a time.

By interacting horizontally, we identify all of the issues that affect the central goal. For example, if you look at the way we are planning conferences, you will see different committees partnering on session topics. This is a result of horizontal thinking. Consider what is required to take an agreement, determine a value, obtain environmental clearance, complete the appropriate documents and ensure the surveys and title are correct. There are five disciplines involved right there! The common thread is that we are all working together and focused on the goal. It makes sense that, as an Association, we get all of our committees and members thinking horizontally as partnerships rather than in single silos.

Do you foresee major changes in our profession during the next few years?

I really do! I envision that the Association and the membership itself will be viewed by others as the leading authority for right of way. Instead of being subjected to the schedules and direction from others,

I see us being pursued for our input and perspective. As more people understand that our success requires collaboration between multiple entities, I foresee that, in the near future, we will have an equal seat at the table.

What is your secret for keeping a healthy balance between work, family and volunteer commitments?

Volunteering has always been – and will continue to be – important to me. IRWA has given me an opportunity to contribute to my profession. My involvement in the YMCA and the local minor hockey league has given me the opportunity to contribute to my community. All of these are important, not only because it makes you a better professional, but a better person as well. Through volunteering, I have received far greater benefits than I could have ever imagined.

A sense of balance and commitment is critical, and anyone who knows me recognizes that that

family comes first. In fact, my entire family is now involved at the YMCA. Susan and I attend classes together. My son volunteered and worked there, and my daughter started there as a volunteer and is now the Director of Membership. I am a volunteer instructor for Hi Low Aerobics, Step, Pilates, Aquafit, Musclevorks and several other disciplines. At one time, my daughter was in charge of the volunteer instructors, and we got to work together. My greatest moment was overhearing her tell someone that she couldn't instruct an aerobics class one evening, but not to worry because her dad would handle it! How cool is that?

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

Get on board – you will never find anything as diverse and interesting. It has to be good. After all, anything that can't be explained in 10 seconds must include intrigue, mystery, excitement and satisfaction! 🚀

