



BY BARBARA BILLITZER

AN INTERVIEW WITH IRWA INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT, **KENNETH L. DAVIS, SR/WA**

A perpetual road warrior, Ken is constantly on the move. In a rare moment of down time, Ken shares his plans for IRWA and his passion for the right of way profession.

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

Undoubtedly, it was being a part of IRWA's 2005 Education Summit. For those of us fortunate enough to participate, it was one of those life-changing experiences. We had some idea why we were there, but none of us realized the magnitude of the process we were being asked to begin. A diverse mix of members and stakeholders were assembled for one purpose – to form the blueprint for transforming IRWA's education and professional development for the foreseeable future.

When asked to envision what our education structure would look like if we didn't have one was one of those 'deer in the headlights' moments. It didn't seem to matter that most of us had decades of experience. Being asked to invent

something from the bottom up was no easy task. Fortunately, the outside facilitator, whose role was to herd us in the right direction, stepped in. By the end of the summit, we knew we had created a vision for the organization that far exceeded anyone's expectations. To date, we have completed most of the twelve initiatives generated during the Summit.

What originally attracted you to the right of way profession?

I jokingly tell everyone that it was the big salary, the company car and the expense account. Of course, none of that had much to do with my decision to join the profession. Actually, I was working in field engineering for the Consolidated Gas Transmission Corporation at the time, and part of my job was to provide the right of way agents with maps, plats and construction information on our projects. Over

time, I became impressed with their professionalism and the breadth of knowledge they all seemed to possess. When asked if I would be interested in becoming a Lease and Right of Way Agent, I jumped at the chance. I have never looked back, and I can honestly say I can't think of anything else I would rather be doing.

What led you to become an IRWA member?

On my first day as an agent, I was handed a packet of procedures and forms to review. On top of the stack was an application to join the Association. Back then it was the American Right of Way Association, so I asked my manager what the ARWA was and he said, "It's an organization you will join if you work in my department." I admit that this was, by far, the best order I'd ever been given.

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

There are so many that it's difficult to pick just one. The opportunity to learn through the courses we offer is an important one. There is also the chance to network with fellow professionals and potential clients, to mentor and to be mentored, to grow in one's ability to lead through volunteering at various levels of the organization, and to make people aware that we are truly professionals.

I believe the benefits change for each individual member, depending on their experience, position and needs at the time. As we grow, we all have different goals and interests. That's what makes IRWA so great. The Association offers something for everyone no matter where they are in their development.

What would you say is the Association's most untapped resource?

Our members are an unparalleled resource, yet a large majority of them have not been fully engaged. Many chapters have members that they've only seen once or twice, if at all. These folks join so they can add IRWA to their resume and get the magazine or the member rate for courses. We count them in our membership numbers, accept their dues and often leave it at that. My guess is that somewhere around 50-60 percent of our members are inactive in the true sense of the word.

Of course, I can't fault anyone for being inactive. The responsibility falls to the chapter. We need to do a better job of identifying the needs and interests of our members at the chapter level. This is especially true of our younger members, as their needs are clearly different from our "graying" mainstay. If we identify what draws members to our chapter meetings, we can tap into this huge wealth of potential new leaders.

What led to your decision to become actively involved in IRWA leadership?

I became involved in my chapter's leadership out of necessity. We had rotated our active members through the offices so many times I started to feel bad for them and volunteered to step into the rotation. Once I became President, one of my duties was to attend the Region Forums. After attending a few forums, I became friends with some of the region leadership, and they convinced me that I should become active at the region level.

After two years as Region Vice Chair, you typically move up to the position of Chair. I was fortunate in that, during my first year as a Region Chair, the IEC met with all Region Chairs as an ad hoc committee. It was the precursor for what is now called the International Governing Council, which includes the Region Chairs as a part of the governing body. The interaction and collaboration was amazing. I was hooked. It didn't take long to decide to make a run for the IEC, and the rest is history.



As he assumes his new leadership role, Ken shares the moment with wife Marie, who affixes the Presidential pin.



Ken shares family time with his daughter Beth Thompson (center), son-in-law John and grandkids Nick, Emma and Jacob.

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

There have actually been two major challenges. One is personal and the other is organizational. From a personal standpoint, it has been finding more time to devote to IRWA. Unfortunately, my day job has to take precedence, since my wife still expects me to bring home a paycheck. When times are lean, you spend as much time as possible trying to bring in work. And when times are good, there isn't enough time for anything.

From an organizational standpoint, my biggest challenge has been—and continues to be—the formation and implementation of the new Certification/Designation Career Path. Designing the structure was a challenge. Identifying the required courses for each step was a challenge. Determining a reasonable amount of experience was a challenge. And getting consensus from the membership continues to be a challenge.

All in all, we must stand back and ask ourselves how each decision is going to impact our organization as a whole. The things we do today will hopefully improve the organization and benefit future generations. We have to be willing to make some sacrifices now to ensure that.

Has your employer been supportive of your IRWA involvement?

I have been extremely fortunate to have had such exceptional support from my employers. I started my career in right of way in 1976 and was given an application to join the Association by my supervisor on my first day on the job. From that day forward, there was only one span of about seven years when I did not have the full financial support and encouragement from my employer. The others have all recognized the enormous benefits gained, not only for me personally, but to the company stemming from all the educational and networking opportunities.

What role has education played in your career?

I've always said that I count the day a total loss if I didn't learn something new. Learning opportunities are everywhere, and I recognized early on that education can come from many different sources. Just about everyone I meet has taught me something.

I finished my undergraduate degree at the ripe old age of 39. In addition to the many IRWA courses I have taken, I read everything I can get my hands on and

listen carefully when someone speaks. This has helped me to stay flexible as the winds of opportunity shift from one type of acquisition to another. Over the course of my career, I have overseen oil and gas leases, purchased right of way pipelines, power lines, fiber optics, rail lines, telephone lines, cell sites, highways, bus ways and property for airports. Since my first day on the job as a right of way agent in 1976, I am proud to say that I have never been unemployed. I attribute this to what I've gained through taking IRWA courses and the mentoring I've received from members along the way.

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

My most immediate priority is the implementation of our new career path—in its entirety. I see this as a critical step in bringing recognition to our members as true professionals and getting us on an equal footing with all the other professions we collaborate with on our projects.

Another priority is improving the communications between our members, chapters, regions and committees. We have a breakdown in how we share information, and I think it's doing a disservice to each member. Our committee members, region





Auctioning the Presidential “puppet” each year has become an annual tradition.

officers and chapter leaders have learned to communicate with each other, but we’re just not getting the word out to our members and to the various agencies and industries we serve. In the next few months, I plan to address these specific challenges and collaborate with our leadership to find the best solutions.

What types of global opportunities do you envision for the Association?

I believe this is one of the most exciting times in the history of our organization. In the past few months, we have been approached by representatives from several countries interested in our education and certification programs. Some of these inquiries have already led to membership possibilities, and there is potential for new chapters to be formed outside the borders of the United States and Canada.

There are currently three countries where this may become a reality in the near future. Australia, Saudi Arabia and Thailand have all indicated their desire and a willingness to offer our courses and certification programs to their members. They have also discussed other options, such as forming some sort of organized affiliation including their own chapters.

We have also been in recent discussions with two major organizations that want to offer our courses to their members. Between them, they have in excess of 150,000 members worldwide. The potential for cross-credentialing with them is enormous. As we become more widely recognized as the authority in the field of right of way across the globe, we will certainly reinforce our “central authority” position in North America.

Where do you see the most growth potential?

Within our own borders, I see two major areas of potential growth. One is with the thousands of local public agencies across the country. We need to find a better way to get the message out that we have educational opportunities specifically targeted for them. There are undoubtedly other benefits we could provide. It may be as simple as getting our committees and chapters to visit these agencies on a local level. We can certainly help these agencies by offering resources and collaborating with them, but we must first introduce them to IRWA.

We also have a wealth of potential members in the pipeline industry, yet we currently have little to offer them. Some of our courses are relevant, but without a certification program, the networking opportunities are limited. In order to take advantage of these two virtually untapped resources, we need to identify what they need and how we can provide it.

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

I tell them that it’s more than a job – it’s a way of life. I convey that there is nothing like looking around and realizing that every convenience we have can be linked back to someone in our profession. You can’t travel a road, turn on a light, plug in an appliance or use a cell phone where a right of way agent hasn’t helped to make it possible.

I also ask them to consider what other careers offer the opportunity to travel the country, talk to the most interesting people, learn something every day, all while getting paid for it. It’s been the best kept secret in the world. Of course, we plan to change that.



An avid outdoorsman, Ken enjoys boating and fishing with grandkids Emma and Nick on Pittsburgh’s Lake Arthur.