

We never could have imagined that our small town of Nashville and our modest Chapter 32 would eventually host one of the very best IRWA conferences ever. But in 2008—during my road trip to the Annual Education Conference in Austin, Texas with my good friend William R. (Bobby) Flowers, Jr.—a small idea began hatching into a grand event.

An Unlikely Idea

Bobby and I normally traveled together to the IRWA Conferences as it gave us a chance to catch up on our lives and to brainstorm about all things “right of way.” This trip was no exception. You might recall that 2008 was a tough time for all of us. The economic downturn was causing a downward spiral in membership and leadership, so we headed to Austin with a mixed sense of despair and hope.

In his quiet manner, Bobby said, “We need to energize the Chapter. Let’s bring the conference to Nashville!” My immediate response was to laugh out loud and tell him what a crazy idea it was. We argued this for the remainder of the trip. I focused on our Chapter’s dwindling membership, poor attendance at meetings and limited class participation. But Bobby insisted that his idea was not only possible—it was great. He suggested that we discuss the possibility with the Austin Conference Committee members to get some information on how it’s done. This idea resulted in the first of many positive meetings with our friends on the International Transportation Committee and local Austin Chapter 74 members.

During these discussions, we discovered that one of the main local public agencies for the Austin



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Chapter was the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT). They were Chapter leaders and very active in Regional and Chapter membership/certification. With support from the Chapter, TXDOT had provided the engine that was driving most of the Austin Conference. Unfortunately, we did not have that luxury in Tennessee, but it certainly sparked an idea. During the rest of the Austin Conference, we gathered as much information as possible from committee members and intensely watched how the bid process worked for upcoming conferences.

Convincing the Chapter

The Nashville 2016 Conference was put on the next Chapter meeting agenda as new business. I began with giving our members a report on the Austin Conference and the positive feedback we received from Austin and IRWA Headquarters staff. To our surprise, the idea faced strong opposition. In some ways, it was understandable. You may or may not recall that the Nashville 1978 Conference took an army of volunteers, used more funds than we had expected and essentially divided the Chapter membership.

Nonetheless, we took a vote on Nashville 2016, and it was overwhelmingly defeated.

It would have been easy to give up at that point, but we didn’t. Bobby came up with a crazy plan to garner member support by wearing Nashville “Sweet 16” cowboy shirts and straw hats to the 2010 Calgary Conference. Chapter opposition remained skeptical at best, but the response from other international attendees was overwhelmingly positive.

Creating a Plan of Action

On our return trip from Calgary to Nashville, Bobby and I came up with our next plan of action. With 42 return hours to brainstorm, you can imagine what our to-do list looked like by the time we got home. The stage was set for the vote at the next Chapter meeting. Our 2010 Chapter President John B. Boynton, Jr. supported our conference idea and placed it as a main discussion on the agenda. Bobby and I reported the positive response we got from attendees throughout the United States, Canada and all over the world, as well as all the conference planning information we got from IRWA’s Event Coordinator, Jade Meador.



A look back at the success of Nashville 2016

We also addressed the opposition's concerns. Nashville 2016 would not drain our Chapter members since Headquarters would be in charge of organizing much of the conference itself. We would need volunteer support, conference funds and leadership, but the total cost was much lower than previously discussed and it would not break our budget.



Nashville 2016 Conference Co-Chairs Jenni Kriner, SR/WA and Dan Gill, SR/WA.

With Chapter support and IRWA Headquarters' organizational resources, we could make Nashville 2016 happen. With some trepidation, I moved for a vote. This time, the final conference vote was in favor of our plan. We were on our way!

Utilizing Our Resources

It takes a village and this is certainly true when planning a major conference. Region 6 reached out to us and provided a lot of support in the way of volunteer staff and conference branding. With the renewed enthusiasm of our members, our educational presentations began to pick up steam with greater attendance and great profits. This contributed to making Nashville 2016 possible without draining our budget. And as we had learned in Austin, getting help from local public agencies was the key to success.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation helped tremendously with renewed educational support for their employees. Of particular significance was our winning conference video, "Music is Our

Home." The video was filmed at the Chapter winter meeting and featured TDOT Commissioner John Schroer. It served as a fantastic marketing tool to win the support of the Conference Planning Committee.

In 2011, we attended the conference bidding meeting at the Atlanta Conference. We were equipped with renewed membership involvement, financial stability and a stellar Conference Bid Committee made up of Jenni Kriner, SR/WA and Dan Gill, SR/WA. We were ready and able to bring home the conference to Nashville in 2016. We were later informed that it was one of the largest winning margins ever.

The Rest is History

Nashville 2016 garnered the second largest conference attendance ever. The traditional Monday Night event was one of the most outstanding and well-attended in the history of the event. Thanks to one of our biggest supporters, Carol Croft & Associates, we raised significant funds for the Right of Way International Education Foundation. In short, Nashville 2016 stood high in IRWA conference history and proves that if we could do it, so can you. Tenacity and creativity can truly make a difference. The future of infrastructure and right of way depends on it. 🌟



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