

## Introducing IRWA's New CEO

# CHARLIE NOBLES

**I'm excited to take on the challenges at IRWA and humbled to have been selected as your new CEO. After 15 years leading the American Sailing Association, I had been looking for a new challenge—one where I would have a passion for the association's mission and one in which I could fully utilize my association management experience. I found both as I learned about IRWA.**

### Professional Background

My professional experience is diverse. Ultimately, that's something unique I bring to the job that transcends a typical linear progression in management experience.

I began my career in management consulting after graduating from Stanford with a physics degree. After earning my MBA at the University of Texas at Austin, I headed to California to work in finance for IRS Records, the record label best known for introducing two big 80s bands, the Go-Go's and R.E.M. Two of my co-workers and I left IRS a few years later to start TWISTED Records, a niche dance music label under the MCA music family. While running TWISTED, I started and ran a textbook company that published high school driver education textbooks. We had the number three book in that marketplace.

A few years later, a Wall Street Journal ad caught my eye. The Planetary Society (TPS), founded by astronomy celebrity Carl Sagan, was looking for a Chief Operating Officer (COO). Neil Degross Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium in NYC and the man who would later go on to host Cosmos, said that of all the business people they interviewed, he knew I was the



one for the job since I was the only MBA candidate who owned his own telescope and had a passion for astronomy. While COO at TPS, I was responsible for creating and holding the largest fundraiser in its 20-year history and creating a key partnership with planetariums worldwide that provided TPS members admission discounts. One of the things I remember most about my time there was a meeting with one of our new donors. He had just sold his interest in the internet company he had founded and was considering donating to TPS to encourage the exploration of Mars. By the end of the meeting, he mentioned that he would probably just start his own rocket company in order to promote Mars exploration the way he thought was best. That was our meeting with Elon Musk just after he sold PayPal to eBay, and everyone is now familiar with SpaceX.

My experience running TPS, a membership-based association, combined with my love for recreational sailing led to me taking my next position as the Executive Director of the for-profit American Sailing Association (not to be confused with the other ASA—the American Society of Appraisers). When I joined ASA in 2004, it faced challenges on a number of fronts: it was operating just at break-even; its educational materials were all extremely outdated and considered well below the quality of our competitors; our stakeholders, sailing school owners and sailing instructors felt ignored; members were dissatisfied with the level of support and customer service provided by headquarters; and ASA offered few benefits or incentives to its members. During my time there, we completely revised the writing, illustrations, design and photography of every one of our textbooks. Now each one is considered “best in class” within the sailing industry. We grew membership from less than 4,000 to over 30,000. Revenue grew by 300 percent, and net profit went from zero to several hundred thousand dollars a year, all while investing to improve our products. Finally, we grew our international presence from about 10 sailing schools to 100. Perhaps most importantly, we dramatically improved and strengthened our brand.

After 15 good years at the Sailing Association, I was ready for a new challenge. While working at ASA, I had earned my California broker’s license, and I began investing in residential real estate in California and my home state of Texas. With my newer interest in real estate and my association background, the IRWA position I found online seemed like it could be a great fit!

### My Vision for the Future of the IRWA

If I had to pick four, the areas at IRWA that I’m most excited about working to improve are the quality and consistency of our educational materials, our communication and responsiveness to stakeholders outside of Headquarters (HQ), the strength and recognizability of our brand, as well as the number



Charlie and Laura with Anthony Hopkins at his birthday party in Maui.

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and depth of our international partners. Certainly, that’s not to disparage what’s there now. I simply see room to move the needle in all these areas. I think the biggest challenge that the Association faces is that it has no existing or direct competitors. While this might seem like a benefit, it’s really easy to become complacent about the quality of your offerings when that’s the case. I’m definitely dating



myself, but I think back to the American car companies in the early 1970s. Just before the Japanese companies came on as strong competitors, you had poorly performing and poorly designed cars like the Pinto, Pacer, Satellite and so forth. A lot of that was due to complacency.

IRWA has a lot of existing strengths and assets. Its courses and professional designations are highly respected by professionals in the right of way field. Its member professionals are committed and passionate. The Association has an unusually strong, committed group of volunteer leaders, many of whom work consistently longer and harder than their counterparts in other associations. This itself is a key pillar of the IRWA culture. The Association is on sound financial footing, which gives it access to the financial resources that positive change requires. And what's most interesting to me—and I believe most valuable to the Association—is that you've got a tremendous set of underutilized talent with the staff at HQ, at the IGC level, with the Board of Advisors and throughout the group of instructors and Chapter leadership.

Quality of educational materials is near and dear to my heart. I've had about 25 years of experience producing educational textbooks, online courses and supplemental materials. I see my role in the process to be like a symphony conductor, providing leadership and resources so that the subject matter, educational and design experts have the full support they need to do their best work. You need a creative process that allows full involvement of the key stakeholders and subject matter experts, while preventing a "too many cooks in the kitchen" situation from allowing the process to stretch out months—or years—beyond what is necessary. That's where the experience that I'm drawing on will help.

When a company or an association is firing on all cylinders, there's an element of fun and a sense of excitement in its ranks. I'm hoping to begin building that up at the IRWA through a series of smaller sets of wins. An executive coach I once worked with called this the "three-foot toss," meaning that it's hard to sink a 20-foot shot, but everybody could build confidence with a set of short, relatively easy baskets. There's a lot of wisdom in that. That's the approach I used at the Sailing Association by improving (and in many cases establishing) communication with our sailing schools and instructors. I believe there's a lot of room to improve communication both to and from HQ and the field.

In my short time at IRWA, I've heard a number of people mention that they feel that IRWA and its professional designations should have better recognition outside the Association. This isn't something that can be adequately



Charlie, Laura and daughter Audrey at home in Newport Coast.

addressed in the short term, but there are definitely things we can begin doing near term to build the brand. With all the national discussions about 5G and aging infrastructure, there's an appetite in the media that provides opportunities to do this.

The international piece has the longest time horizon. For one, we need the first three pieces I've mentioned to be in place to provide the springboard for international expansion. Developing the right international relationships takes time. At ASA, we started expanding in China. In hindsight, this was done without the proper oversight and with the wrong partners. Once we eventually found the right partner, we grew more quickly and without problems, but it was a learning experience.

### Final Thoughts

We improve people's quality of life through infrastructure development. Our products, communication and expansion should reflect the pride of our mission. I'm looking forward to aggressively realizing what I see as the Association's untapped potential and working with the entire IRWA community to do so! ✨