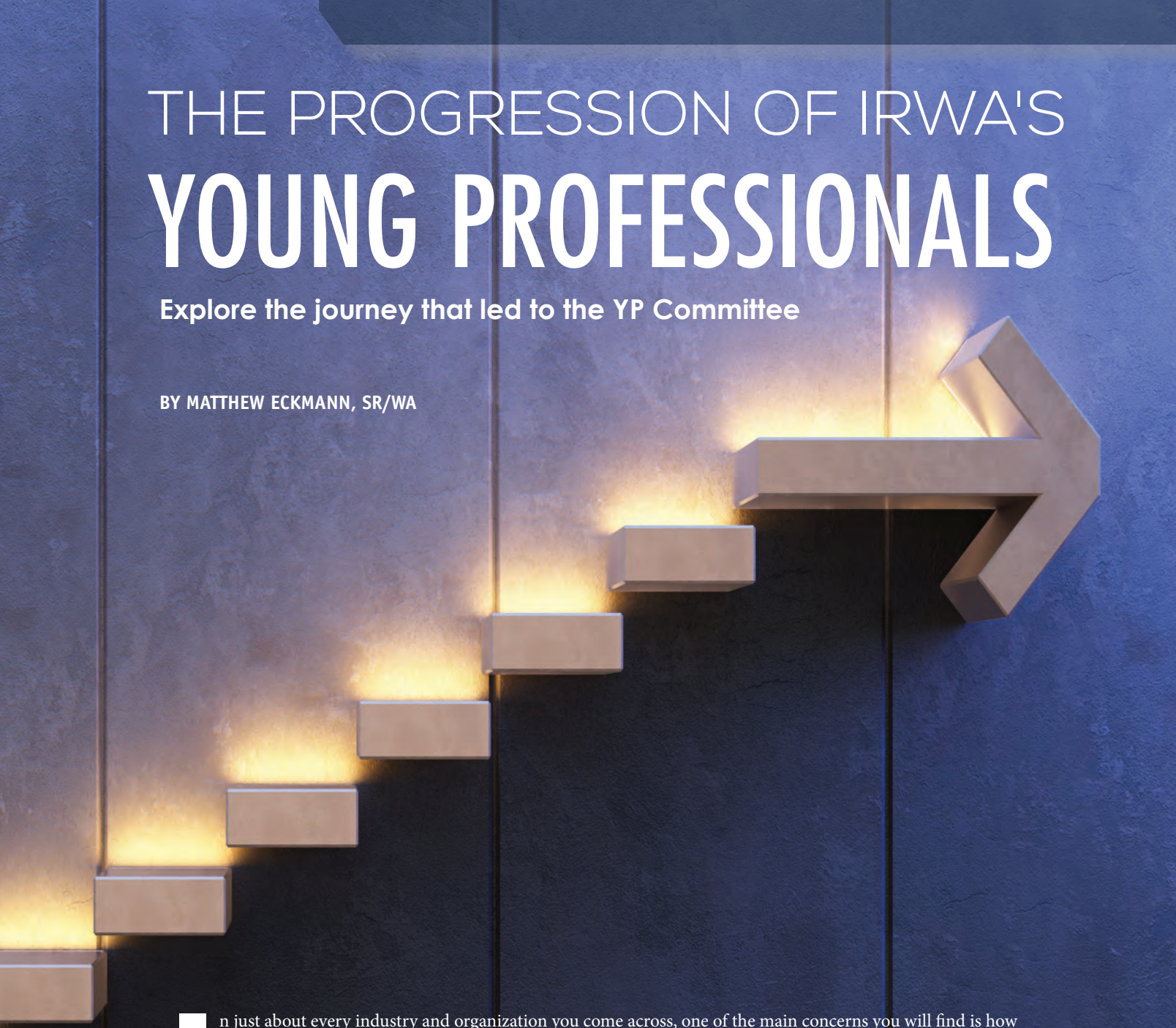
THE PROGRESSION OF IRWA'S YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

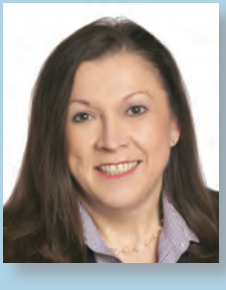
Explore the journey that led to the YP Committee

BY MATTHEW ECKMANN, SR/WA



In just about every industry and organization you come across, one of the main concerns you will find is how to continue attracting new members or employees. Therein lies the creation of most Young Professionals (YP) Groups. Most begin small with a few passionate people sitting around a table and brainstorming ideas on how to attract more members to that table. Once at capacity, they go and find a bigger table, and then a whole room. Before you know it, this small YP movement has taken on a life of its own.

IRWA is no different. The progression of the Young Professionals movement started about 20 years ago with a small group of passionate individuals who created the first YP Group. I am excited to present interviews with two of these passionate people: **Faith Roland, SR/WA**, and **Jim Struble, SR/WA**. Fast forward about a decade and we see a resurgence in the Young Professionals movement. Again, we see a group of dedicated members who come together and commit themselves to advancing the YP initiatives within the organization. This group included **Brodie Allen, SR/WA**, and **Brett Farner, SR/WA**, who we have asked to contribute to this article as well. From 2011 through today, the Young Professionals Group has continued to grow and flourish in no small part to the Chairs who have led the group forward year after year. We have asked two of these Chairs, **Nikkiy Bestgen** and **Carmelita Delgado**, to provide their insights on the succession of the Young Professionals Group to the Young Professionals Committee.



Faith A. Roland, SR/WA
Contract Land Staff, LLC

Faith A. Roland, SR/WA, is the Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC. She is a celebrated thought leader within the Public Infrastructure Community and served as International President of IRWA in 2008-2009. Faith continues to mentor and lead as a much sought-after CLIMB certified instructor and through her role establishing the Leadership Institute for IRWA. She has twice received the Professional of the Year award from her Chapter and in 2015, she received the prestigious Louise L. & Y.T. Lum award.

Jim Struble, SR/WA
Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District

Jim Struble, SR/WA, is the Real Estate Manager for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, where he has been employed since 1986. Jim is an active member of IRWA Chapter 6, Denver. Beginning in 1990, he held the offices of Chapter President, Newsletter Editor and Vice Chair of the Professional Development Committee, as well as Chair of Region 9 and Vice Chair of the International Professional Development Committee. Jim was named Chapter 6 Professional of the Year in 1999 and he was IRWA's 2007-2008 International President.

Before the YP Group existed, what resources were available to Young Professionals for networking, mentoring, support and overall immersion into IRWA?

Faith: The only resource back then was local, one-on-one mentoring and only if you were lucky enough to find someone with the time and skills to mentor. I had good encouragement from a few of my older co-workers during my first right of way job with the County. I was encouraged to attend the Chapter lunches and able to begin taking courses. Meeting others in class and getting to know my peers was what helped the most.

Jim: After joining the IRWA in 1990, I was fortunate to have several individuals from the Denver Chapter who were willing and ready to mentor me and other younger members of the Chapter. At my first IRWA Conference in 1990, I met several individuals who eagerly encouraged me to get more involved in the Association.

What was the primary goal/reason for creating this group?

Faith: I came in at year two of young leadership. I believe it was initially designed for younger participants, but we had a very wide range of ages at my first meeting. We had several debates about age limitations and eventually changed the name to LDC – Leadership Development Council. In hindsight, I think it should have been focused on the participants under 40 and should have kept "young leadership" as a focal point. There is a need to have a peer to peer exchange of ideas and I believe age and tenure in the profession do matter.

Jim: The International Executive Committee established a forum for young professionals of the IRWA to get together as the Young Leadership Council. The Council was formed out of a commitment to develop new IRWA leaders with two purposes in mind. The first was to foster creative thought for younger, talented individuals involved in the right of way profession. The second was to serve as a source of leadership for local Chapters, Regions and International Committees.

Tell us the process of creating the Young Professionals Group. Were there any particular hurdles you all had to face?

Faith: Funding for the group and for attendees will always be a hurdle. I was fortunate to come from a larger Chapter. We budgeted to support/sponsor two or three attendees several years in a row. Every single person that received support from our Chapter ended up coming back to the Chapter and served in all the offices, including president. If a Chapter invests in their future leaders, they will see the benefit of fresh ideas and engaged leaders.

Jim: Each Chapter was asked to send at least one young member to be a part of the inaugural meeting held in 1998. Approximately 33 Chapters each sponsored a member. Those of us in attendance expressed interest in being given opportunities to become a bigger part of the Association. Others shared that their Chapter's leadership believed the new members needed to acquire more experience—in other words, they needed to pay their dues and then leadership would decide the course of the new member's future involvement. Additionally, we quickly realized that membership struggled when it came to defining Young Professionals. Were they young in age or were they young in their new careers?

Can you recall any notable events that propelled this group forward?

Faith: I believe holding events consistently for several years running gave us momentum. We also added training and presentations to the daylong event that focused on leadership development. Most of all, giving younger members a venue to connect was the key to giving me the motivation to pursue leadership. Peer to peer support and camaraderie has built lifelong relationships that I still have today.

Jim: We had very good leadership, but I must admit we struggled at first as we moved from year two to year three, but I felt that the YLC was really starting to come together. If you look at the individuals in the photo, there are several who became Chapter, Regional and International Committee leaders in the years after the original YLC began.

What are some of the major differences between your experience as a Young Professional compared to the Committee that exists today?

Faith: Today's group is more committed to stand apart and be recognized as a fresh voice in our industry. They are not afraid to try new things or to limit participation to a more clearly defined age group. We kept getting pushed to include "new to the industry" as opposed to just "young professionals." I believe in the model where age limitation is a criterion. After 35-40, most folks really are at another stage in career and in life. Fresh energy comes from always having new folks join and others move on to leadership.

Jim: I am not sure if there are many differences. I think the young leaders today want what we wanted 20 years ago: to be a part of the IRWA. We wanted to help grow the IRWA and to make it an organization that attracted members. We wanted to be the future mentors! I am glad that the committee has come back strong. I do believe that we will see these individuals become future IRWA leaders and I am glad that these individuals are being invited to leadership meetings and are involved in helping to shape the IRWA.

If you could share one vital piece of advice for a Young Professional just entering the profession and IRWA, what would it be?

Faith: Participate fully! This is a line I use a lot when coaching and mentoring my own teams. You only get out what you put in. The moment I became engaged at my Chapter level, I participated fully— volunteering and saying yes when asked to serve. It then opened my eyes to how we are structured Regionally and Internationally. Say yes and you will learn and grow within our industry. I have been thankful every day for the opportunities I've received within this profession and for every time I raised my hand to volunteer and to serve others.

Jim: I think we are in an exciting time right now with a lot of new infrastructure being done around the world. There is a multitude of opportunities out there for younger members to be a part of. Don't be shy. Challenge yourself. Join your local Chapters, introduce yourself to a long-time member and ask them to be your mentor.

Brodie Allen, SR/WA
Evolve Surface Strategies Inc.

Brodie Allen, SR/WA, is the President of Evolve Surface Strategies Inc., a negotiation and acquisition firm in Western Canada. Brodie has been a right of way professional for 19 years and has a passionate background in the IRWA. He has served as Region 10 Chair, Chapter 48 President, Leadership Task Force committee member and YP Chair.

Brett Farner, SR/WA
Ameren Services Company

Brett Farner, SR/WA is a Manager in the Real Estate Department at Ameren Services Company. He has been a member of IRWA's Chapter 37, Region 3 since 2008 and served as Chapter President in 2012-2013. Brett also served on the International Nominations and Elections Committee, was a past Chair of the Region 3 Young Professionals Committee, served on the RWIEF as a YP Trustee and is currently serving as a member of the IRWA International Finance Committee.

Explain the environment of the Young Professionals at the time. Had there been a decline in participation?

Brodie: When I first got involved, the concept of formalizing the YP Group was in its infancy. Tyler Jans, SR/WA, had quarterbacked organizing two successful YP Mini Conferences in 2011 and 2012. However, the YP Group was not considered a Task Force until 2013 when Lisa Harrison, SR/WA—who was IEC President at the time—formalized the initiative. I did not see a decline in participation at that time as we really had nowhere to go but up with participation.

Brett: When I started on the YP Task Force, there really wasn't an active YP Group within the Association. What I found interesting after the YP Task Force started moving forward was learning about the YP Groups that had been formed and existed previously. It seemed that each generation had started their own IRWA YP Group, but none of them lasted beyond that generation of people.

What steps did you take to advance the Young Professionals into the powerhouse that it is today?

Brodie: First steps were to assemble a talented team to help define direction. In September 2013, Courtney Otto, SR/WA, Brett Farner, SR/WA, Aaron Adkins, SR/WA, Tyler Jans, SR/WA, and I had an initial meeting to set our group's vision and goals. Part of that exercise was a look back on history. Many members thought 2011 - 2013 were the first YP concepts. In actuality, the initial YP movement started years prior and involved a group of young members which included Faith Roland, SR/WA, and Jim Struble, SR/WA. That group/initiative obviously worked as both those individuals went on to be International Presidents. However, the group did end, which brought us to one of our early key goals: focus on strategies/objectives that ensure long-term sustainability of the YP presence across the Association.

Brett: We moved forward as a team. I was asked to be on the initial Task Force in 2013 by Brodie Allen and Tyler Jans. The initial focus was around creating opportunities for Young Professionals to get involved in the Association—specifically the Annual Conference. The team went on to create, develop, host and renew a YP Event at the IRWA Annual Conference in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Were there any changes you implemented or wished to see?

Brodie: As the YP development was in its infancy, we were not so much focused on changes. Instead, our early objectives would be fine-tuned with future leaders. As noted, one key objective was to merge the YP movement as much as possible with the other IRWA initiatives. From day one, a long-term goal was to formalize the YP as a committee or a group with funding and ongoing IGC support. As I was also the Region 10 Chair at the time, it allowed updates to flow directly to/from the IGC and provided the ability to solicit continued support from the IGC, as well as HQ.

Brett: As the YP Event at Annual Conference continued to grow, it was becoming clear that the YP Task Force was competing with the rest of IRWA for visibility. In 2016, IRWA held the Global Congress session on the Saturday before the Annual Education Conference, which led to further competition for sponsors, media and participants. At the end of the Conference in Nashville, the Young Professionals Group asked for a meeting with IRWA leadership to start the discussion about incorporating the YPG platform into the Conference. Following that initial meeting in Nashville, the YPG worked with IRWA to transition the YP movement into the continued operations of the Association, including IEC participation in YPG meetings, Right of Way Magazine articles and full Conference planning participation.

Another significant change occurred in 2015 when Taylor Sass became YP Chair. Taylor had been very involved in her Chapter and Region Young Professionals Groups, and she brought that experience

to the role. The YPG would now have Region Representatives under Taylor's leadership. Each Region Representative was encouraged to bring the YP initiative to the Region and Chapter levels. Following the 2014 Annual Conference in Hartford, Aimie Mims, SR/WA, Jake Farrell, SR/WA, Mindy Leadholm, SR/WA, Michelle MacMillan, SR/WA, Brent Lundgren, SR/WA, and myself started the Region 3 Young Professionals Committee. As the current Region 3 YP Rep, I was excited to see this change being implemented across the Association.

Were there any particular hurdles or memories that stand out to you about this process?

Brodie: Without question, the hot topic of the day was whether or not YP participation should have an age limit associated with it. There was a lot of passion for this topic. As such, a good majority of our initial efforts were put into defining what it meant to be a YP in the IRWA, prior to focusing on goals for YPs. In order to move our group forward in the first formal year, we elected to drop the age topic and we built a set of questions for YPs to self-identify with.

Brett: The hurdle for me was always relevance. Convincing our industry, employers, sponsors, mentors and even the Young Professionals of the importance of engagement was and is hard. There is only so much time, money and people resources to go around and everyone wants to get the most value out of the Association that they can. Memories are the easy part because of the people I shared them with. When we completed the first YP Event in Hartford as the Young Professionals Task Force, the team was sitting in the lobby of the hotel debriefing. A photographer came up and asked to take our picture and referred to us as the group that made the YPs happen–while not historically accurate, the comment still felt pretty awesome! It is just one of my favorites from years of memories working on this initiative.

What are some of the major differences between your experience as a Young Professional compared to the Committee that exists today?

Brodie: It is very encouraging to see that the YPs are being imbedded in to the Association, rather than an initiative or task force of the day. After that, honestly, I'm really not too sure as I've purposely stepped back with following the fine details. One of the challenges I've always struggled with is when past committee leaders continue to be involved long beyond their advisory year as it does not help keep the energy fresh. Particularly with the YPs, I felt that it was very important for me to completely step back and let the next talented team run with continuing to mold the YP vision. From what I hear, things are going extremely well!

Brett: There are probably several differences between now and then, but certainly we were a smaller team then and we were not an official committee (I'm very excited for the new YP Committee) and we did not have money for travel. These are all great accomplishments for the current committee, and I am happy to have played whatever part I could to get to this

point. At the end of the day, anyone that volunteered to support the YP initiative had more in common than we had differences. I believe we all wanted to make a positive difference for the Association, industry and Young Professionals.

If you could share one vital piece of advice for a Young Professional just entering the profession and IRWA, what would it be?

Brodie: The IRWA has amazing opportunities to aid in advancing yourself as a professional in our wonderful industry. Every member has a choice of how involved he/she can be and whether they want to take advantage of the opportunities. Ensure you embrace the choice and get involved!

Brett: Get involved in the IRWA and stay involved. I just wrote an article for Right of Way Magazine on this topic, so I won't belabor the point here. I can say my most proud and humble moments involving YPs are those where a fellow Young Professional stepped up to lead, including Nikkiy Bestgen on the YPG, Kasy Chambers (Baldauf) and Carmelita Delgado joining the Right of Way International Education Foundation as YP Trustees, and Aimie Mims being elected to the IEC. There are many more examples I could cite and all are great role models for this Association.

Carmelita Delgado, R/W-NAC
Percheron Field Services

Carmelita Delgado, R/W-NAC, is a member of Chapter 38 Salt Lake City, Utah. She served as Chapter President and a Right of Way International Education Foundation Young Professional Trustee. She is the North Central Regional Manager for Percheron Field Services and enjoys being a member of the IRWA.

Nikkiy Bestgen
Contract Land Staff, LLC

Nikkiy Bestgen is a member of Chapter 37. She is a Sales Manager for Contract Land Staff and a mom of two lovely little men, Eric and Noah. Her time with IRWA has helped to shape her future.

Tell us about the journey the group has made since being revitalized.

Carmelita and Nikkiy: One of the things that we observed was the increased involvement, recognition and focus for the Young Professionals at the Chapter, Region and International levels. This truly was exciting to see and be part of. We had to create initiatives to try and improve the exposure of the group. We worked hard to get our website up and provided the Blue Jeans communication platform so we could continue to communicate more often. We are thankful for the support of HQ and Leadership. Other initiatives include a discount for Young Professionals for the Conference registration fee and different badge colors so that others at the Annual Conference could identify with the YPs. These helped with a natural evolution of the group and drew more attention to the YPs that were attending. The YPs also had a booth in the exhibit hall and raffled off prizes, free courses and Conference registrations. In order to really measure our successes, we started tracking our efforts and providing data recaps at our Chapter and Forum meetings. By reporting these statistics, those who were new to the IRWA (as well as some seasoned members) started to reach out and engage us more. Our communications increased, more ideas started to come about and support to execute grew.

As the spotlight grew on the YPG, the IRWA leadership invited us to an IGC meeting to provide our updates on these efforts and we have since been invited back to additional IGC meetings. We knew we needed to reach more people and we wanted to improve our message. All of this comes together with hard work and support. As we evolved, we became more aware of our financial needs and as each forum, symposium, Chapter meeting and Conference came about, we understood we had to become more structure-driven when asking for monetary support. We set financial goals, made action plans and created specific committees to carry out these tasks. We strived to not only show innovation of our group in speaking sessions, but continue to try new things to keep the energy, engagement and excitement for the YPG.

We knew that with evolution comes change, but as a group, we had all agreed to keep our Saturday Night YP Social going. We have taken it from a few friendly people coming by to maxing out space capacity, making all kinds of new friends and welcoming several new Young Professionals to the IRWA. It is wonderful to see the movement grow and shape year after year.

What was the main reason you wanted to help elevate the Young Professionals Group into the Young Professionals Committee?

Carmelita and Nikkiy: We felt the group status was limiting the ability of the YPG's growth and ability to evolve further. In all honesty, the truest answer is simple: we knew we needed to really establish a place in the IRWA to develop these eager leaders, support them and help them grow. The passion, energy and ideas that several of the YPs have are countless, and we knew we needed to capitalize on this as a committee. The YP Committee was the most stable way to achieve the longevity and guarantee our future. It is very rewarding to look back and see all the work that has gone into taking this group to the next level. The confidence and support is now established and growth is now braving a new path for the YPs to come.

Describe the process of making this change a reality.

Carmelita and Nikkiy: As time has gone on, seeds of ideas, communication and energy were planted. We knew changes would be coming. Once the leadership group of YPG made the decision to pursue this growth, it moved quickly. We discussed these changes with our group of Regional representatives, then YPG Leadership, then IRWA leadership. Everyone was in support. We involved the great minds of our organization to understand how these changes happen and received a lot of feedback from their years within the organization. After understanding the true capacity of changing from the Young Professional Group to the Young Professionals Committee, the idea was pitched to the YPG and they were all in favor of making this leap of change into evolution. The actual execution of getting to a committee was very efficient and quick. It was amazing!

What were the initial reactions from the rest of membership?

Carmelita and Nikkiy: Honestly, the majority of us were expecting both negative and positive feedback due to this large scale of change. Some warned us to be careful of what we were asking for and to understand the changes that could happen with the elevation. Others said it was a necessary move to secure the YPG's future in the IRWA. Some asked how they could help, while others still questioned us and wondered what would the difference be from being a group vs. a committee. After all discussions were held, the majority were in support and agreed this was the next logical step. This meant the YPs would have more of a voice and have a secure, respected position within IRWA.

What would you like to see the Young Professionals accomplish now that they are a committee?

Carmelita and Nikkiy: We would like to see the committee maintain and continue to move forward with the innovations. Particularly, we would like to see the continuation of live streaming education sessions, reduction in costs, as well as an increase in YP voice and opinion within the organization. We are extremely excited for the college outreach program, the education webinars to become a reality and the committee to continue to help shape the YP Recipient of the year. We think the vision of these young leaders is limitless and powerful. We cannot wait to see what their next few years produces for our organization and look forward to supporting their efforts in any way possible.

If you could share one vital piece of advice for a Young Professional just entering the profession and IRWA, what would it be?

Carmelita and Nikkiy: Just try. Venture out and say yes. Attempt to do something you think might be out of your reach. Speak up, raise your hand, challenge your peers and always get involved. Anything you can do helps. If you have a passion for speaking, talk! If you have a passion for writing, submit articles. If you are technically blessed, help with social media, streaming or website advancement. All of us have unique ways we reach our audience. Use yours to get involved. This committee never says no. They always support each other, and they always try. So please come out and get involved!

Finally, be open to the remarkable friendships. In the business world, our two companies happen to be fierce competitors. But in the IRWA YPG world, we were the ultimate teammates. So often we can get caught up in the hum of the business, but IRWA offers networking and friendship that rises above company. We both are loyal to our companies and strive for perfection at our jobs, and yet we are the best of friends. We celebrate our friendship and celebrate our company support in the same way. That is a wonderful and under-celebrated trait of the IRWA. It unites us past our business roles. Our companies—while ferocious competitors—are also our most loyal supporters in achieving these visions. We thank them and all our supporters!

In reading all of the responses from the Young Professionals that have come before me, I feel truly honored to be trusted with the responsibility to continue to lead this movement forward into the coming year. It is an even bigger honor to serve this year under the leadership of International President Aimie Mims, who started her path to leadership as part of the Young Professionals Group. My journey as a YP began at the International Conference in Seattle, WA. I was fortunate enough to have an employer who sponsored me to attend the Young Professionals event that was held that year and from that moment, I was hooked. I spent the next few Conferences learning more about the group until I was given the opportunity to serve as one of the Region 2 Representatives beginning in 2016. I then moved through the ranks, serving as Secretary, Vice Chair and now this year as YP Chair.

In this first year of being recognized as an official committee, we have hit the ground running. We have representatives appointed for almost every Region and have begun working on several initiatives as part of both our strategic plan and special projects brought to light by members of the Committee. Some of these initiatives include continuing to work on the Mentor/Mentee program, implementing a college outreach program and developing an educational webinar that will be hosted by the Committee and available to everyone in the organization. My biggest goal for this year is to see a Young Professional representative serving on the Board in every Chapter in our organization. This may sound like a daunting task, but we are already well on our way due to the great work from those passionate members over the last several years.

In order to continue the success of the Young Professional Committee, it is going to take work and participation from all areas in this organization. Everyone from the individual having the passion to get involved, the employer allowing the employee to participate, the Chapters and Regions continuing to support their Young Professionals by giving them the opportunities to participate in leadership positions to the IRWA as a whole embracing the YPs in their efforts to grow not only in their careers, but also in the organization.

As I conclude this article, I am drawn back to a couple of quotes from Faith Roland's responses. The first is, "participate fully." This seems to have been the common theme with all our interviewees in this article. Participation to the fullest extent has been the cornerstone of their success—not only in their careers, but also in the IRWA. The second quote which stood out to me was: "If a Chapter invests in their future leaders, they will see the benefit of fresh ideas and engaged leaders." This quote not only applies to Chapters, but can also be applied to employers, Regions, Committees and CoPs. If the Young Professionals movement has taught us one thing, it is certainly that investing in the future pays in great dividends. ✪

Matthew Eckmann, SR/WA
City of New Braunfels

Matthew Eckmann, SR/WA, is the Facilities & Real Estate Manager for the City of New Braunfels, Texas and has been an IRWA member since 2008. He is currently serving as Chair of the Young Professionals Committee and Chapter 39 Vice Chair.