



# A UNIFIED VISION

BY ETHEL NAVALES

# An Interview with IRWA International President AIMIE MIMS, SR/WA

Aimie Mims, SR/WA, gazed into the crowd at the Annual International Education Conference in Portland, Oregon. She had just been presented with the International President's pin and the audience looked back at her with anticipation. This was an enormous moment in her IRWA career, and she couldn't help but think of the innumerable highs and lows that led to this.

As she stepped up to the podium, her mind raced thinking of the challenges she had faced in the previous year alone. There were moments, she admitted to herself, when she wondered if it was all worth it. She had joined the International Executive Committee in an untraditional way and her journey hadn't been the easiest. But in the audience, she saw the familiar faces of her mother and her two month old baby, her mentors, colleagues and friends—people who supported her throughout this journey and who fiercely believed in her. In that moment, she knew the struggles she faced and the challenges yet to come would be worth it to ensure that this Association thrives.

There was no doubt that stepping into this position as President meant an incredible amount of responsibility. She was about to embark on what could be one of the most difficult and rewarding years of her entire professional and volunteer career. But she also realized that despite any nerves or any doubts, she was ready.

Aimie looked to the teleprompter and saw a single word rise up before her: breathe. It was a reminder she wrote to herself knowing that her emotions would be running high during such an important moment. So she took a breath, smiled to the crowd and began her speech as IRWA's International President.

## **Tell us how you first became involved in the right of way industry.**

After serving in the United States Peace Corps as a Community Education Promoter for four years in Guyana, South America, I returned home to Minnesota unsure of my next move. I took a job as a temporary front desk receptionist at an engineering firm in my hometown. I started helping the project team on tasks such as landowner mailings, contact log set up and quality control, document research and recording. After several weeks of working together and getting to know each other, the project manager said he was pleased with my performance and intrigued by my background in conflict resolution. He asked if I would be interested in joining their right of way team, to which I responded, "Sure! What's right of way?" And the rest is history.

## **Was there a particular reason or person that led you to join the IRWA?**

The person that got me started in right of way, Michael Noonan, encouraged me to join the IRWA to expand my professional network and help build my technical skillset through the educational courses. It was probably the best advice I ever received.

Mike has been an incredible mentor to me over the past decade and still is to this day. He's helped teach me the technical aspects of our profession and has provided unwavering support and encouragement in my professional endeavors. My hope is that I can "pay it forward" by mentoring and supporting my team members as Mike has done for me.

## **What was your initial impression of the Association and has that perception changed?**

I remember attending my very first IRWA Minnesota Chapter 20 meeting held at the Midland Hills Country Club in St. Paul. The room was packed with around 40-50 people. Everyone seemed like old friends, which was initially intimidating. However, I was warmly welcomed by many members and that quickly put me at ease. I remember thinking there must be a reason the meeting had such a large turnout and I was intrigued to find out why.

Now after having attended numerous meetings over the past 10+ years, I believe our education, credentialing, certifications and networking contribute to what makes this Association so great. But it's clearly more than that. To so many of us, when we think about the IRWA, we think about lifelong friendships and the ability to pick up



after a year or more without seeing each other and not missing a beat. It means a place of understanding, where we don't have to try to explain our jobs to blank stares; we inherently get each other. It means that we challenge and push each other in new and different directions for the sake of what is best for the Association, our profession and the greater good.

### **What do you find most rewarding about volunteering your time to IRWA?**

I'm so inspired by our members and their passion for the work that we do. Our Association is made up of incredible people who do incredible things. We connect people and improve lives in newer, safer, more reliable ways through transportation, energy and water infrastructure projects. We are passionate about the work we do because we know that it matters.

### **Tell us how you became involved in IRWA leadership. What led to your decision to join the IEC?**

I ran from the floor for International Secretary at the Annual Education Conference in San Diego in 2015. I ran for two reasons: 1) I firmly believe that our Association deserves a choice in who we elect to serve on the International Executive Committee by having more than one candidate run for the position, and 2) I believe young and mid-career professionals deserve to have representation on the International Executive Committee (IEC). Historically, members of the IEC had been elected after serving at the Chapter and then at the Region leadership levels. While this experience is certainly valuable, it is not the only path to leadership. By having a leadership team with diverse backgrounds and experience, we are able to represent our membership in a more complete and balanced way.



### **As part of the IEC, what has been the biggest challenge to date?**

Our Association's leaders and staff have been putting in an incredible amount of work to assure our Association is on solid footing. Although we have faced challenges that have stretched us in difficult and unexpected ways, we have been afforded an incredible opportunity. We now have the ability to take stock of who we are as an Association and what we want to become. We have a chance to redefine our legacy.

This year, we will recommit to our fundamental cause of improving people's lives through infrastructure development. And most importantly, we will recommit to each other. After all, no one else understands how much that support of one another means.

I want to take a moment to thank and recognize our Association's staff who have continued to work diligently to serve our members during these times of challenge. Their hard work and commitment to this Association has not gone unnoticed, and I sincerely appreciate all that they do.

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

There are a number of goals I have set and steps to be taken to advance the Association. One of our immediate goals is to provide our Committees and Communities of Practice (CoPs) with the opportunity to determine the course for the year, while establishing a communication and accountability framework. As such, Committee Chairs and CoP Leaders have been tasked with creating strategic plans that outline their fiscal year goals.

Additionally, a priority of the IEC is the development of a strategy for recruiting a new Chief Executive Officer. In the interim, we are working with senior management at Headquarters to provide on-going support to our staff.

### **What do you believe is the role of IRWA's International President?**

I believe that it is not any one individual (not even the President), but rather the entire membership that drives our Association forward. Our Association is large and diverse and often faces conflicting needs and priorities. To me, the President's role is to listen to the membership, Association leaders and staff in order to comprehensively

and thoughtfully understand their needs and desires. It's the President's responsibility to then help prioritize these needs and desires to ensure we have adequate resources available to properly support the initiatives.

**During your speech at the Annual International Education Conference in Portland, you spoke about a unified vision for our Association. Can you expand on that?**

As I discussed in the July/August 2019 issue of *Right of Way Magazine*, the common ground that unites us was recently tested and our Association faced our share of challenges and change. Although we grappled with determining our path forward, these difficulties pushed us to hold each other accountable. Together, we share a unified vision of addressing and prioritizing the issues at hand.

Moving forward, I am confident that our leadership and staff are aligned on how best to support the important work of our members. I am also confident that with any adversity, we will emerge on the other side a stronger, more aligned community of professionals who have a clearer, unified vision of our future.

**What do you want our members to know about you and what can they look forward to this year?**

I shared with those of you who were able to attend the Annual International Education Conference in Portland that I feel a great sense of responsibility in being our Association's President. At the Board of Directors meeting, I committed to give the absolute best of my abilities. I will listen and seek to understand and consider other perspectives to work in the best interest of our Association.

In looking to the year ahead and beyond, we have great things—and great responsibility—on our horizon. The demands for clean water, reliable energy and efficient transportation are mounting. Landowners, communities and stakeholders are counting on us to help mitigate the risks, moderate the process and smooth the conflicts that are inherent in our line of work. Our work is more important than ever, and we must continue to nurture and care for our Association and each other so that we may effectively and responsibly meet these demands.

**How can we better engage our membership?**

I believe that supporting and encouraging new and creative programming initiatives at the Chapter level is crucial to our continued success. After all, our Chapters are the primary way in which new members are brought into the Association.



Additionally, with the implementation of the International Committee and CoP strategic plans, our aim is to provide Committees and CoPs with the support and resources they need to be successful in delivering member value. No one knows our membership needs better than our Committees and CoPs. By empowering them to strategically align with our membership, we in turn will be creating enhanced engagement and member value.

**What is the greatest benefit of membership?**

There are so many incredible benefits to becoming part of the IRWA, which is apparent by just looking at how much this Association means to so many of us. Our education, credentialing and certifications provide the technical know-how and support to our members as they work to improve people's quality of life through infrastructure development. In addition, our meetings and networking allow us to create lifelong friendships with people who understand, guide and support one another.

**Any final words for our membership?**

I will remain honest and committed to working diligently in the best interest of our Association as a whole. You have my word and I expect you to hold me accountable. Together we will partner in trust to do our best and to do the right thing. 🌟