

An Interview with IRWA International President **JEFF JONES, SR/WA**

BY ETHEL NAVALES

Like many, Jeff Jones, SR/WA, stumbled upon the right of way profession rather unexpectedly. So when his boss suddenly made the suggestion to attend an IRWA event, who could have known that Jeff was about to embark on one of the most rewarding aspects of his professional career?

Flash-forward to current day and Jeff has held countless leadership positions in the Committee, Chapter, Region and International level. Passionate about IRWA mentorship and education, Jeff may perhaps be the best person to welcome an IRWA newcomer. Not only does he know this Association inside and out, he personally understands the true value that IRWA can bring to someone's life. After all, who better to lead our members than someone who's capable of empowering them?

How did you first get started in the right of way industry?

Straight out of school, I went to work for the County of Oakland in Michigan, which led me to a position with the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) in Engineering/Design. While creating the plans for road projects, I learned about the need for right of way and most importantly, the importance of communication between the engineering staff and the right of way staff. 17 years into my career at RCOC, a supervisor position opened in our Right of Way Division. I was chosen to fill the position and fell into the right of way profession with both feet running.

What led you to join IRWA?

Truthfully, it was thanks to a handful of inspiring people that I joined and grew invested in the Association. Shortly after starting in the Right of Way Division, my boss Jim Fanzini sent me to the Michigan Chapter 7 Fall Education Seminar. I sat down at a table with two strangers and as luck would have it,

those two strangers turned out to be the future IRWA International President Pat Petitto, SR/WA, and the Balfour Award recipient Alicia Worthley, SR/WA. After some great recruiting over the two and a half days, I went home with a membership application and lots of motivation to continue with IRWA. A short time later, I took classes 101-A and 101-L with Instructor David Burgoyne, SR/WA. I spoke to him about how much I enjoyed the classes and he suggested that I work toward my SR/WA. As you can see, these individuals were pivotal in my journey of growth within the organization.

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

The people. We have some amazing people in all the disciplines of the Association, from our young professionals to our seasoned professionals. I enjoy watching members that are asked to serve in Chapter, Region and International roles learn to embrace their positions. I thoroughly enjoyed coordinating courses and seeing the enthusiasm in learning and wanting more. Most of all, our networking and information sharing is something I am particularly proud of. I know I can always reach out—even to a competitor—for information to solve an issue with a property or project.

What led you to become involved in IRWA leadership?

I can answer that with one name: Pat Petitto. During the 2001 Region 5 Spring Forum in Michigan, I was coordinating a pilot of the first Pipeline course with instructor Alan Wurtz, SR/WA. After the class, Pat stopped by and mentioned that the Region needed a representative for the Local Public Agency Committee and asked if I would be interested. I didn't know at the time, but by saying yes, I was stepping into the beginning of this incredible journey.

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

I have always been a believer in our education process and I will continue to place IRWA education as a priority. I look forward to the continuing improvements that are coming out of the PIPE Committee, both in updating our current courses and in creating new courses. We are developing our instructional presentation with the CLIMB Instructor Program and I am excited to see our students engaged in such a dynamic and beneficial form of class instruction.

Can you expand on your passion for IRWA education and how it began?

When I came into the profession, right of way was a line in the sand you didn't cross without permission. But when I began taking IRWA classes, I learned how to obtain that permission, look for environmental issues, relocate a family or business and much more. It was thanks to this education that I gained the opportunity to grow both professionally and

personally. I got the opportunity to be Chapter Education Chair and Course Coordinator—positions which allowed me to work with the best instructors in our industry, such as W. Howard Armstrong, SR/WA, a true leader and mentor in the Association. My most recent enjoyment was working with the PIPE Committee who showed me that ambition can make IRWA education great.

Have you experienced a meaningful mentor relationship?

I have been blessed with countless mentors throughout my life, including my parents, Ron and Kay Jones, who were my first life mentors. Professionally, Pat Petitto has provided mentoring since my start in IRWA Education and introduced me to the International level of our Association. A particularly meaningful mentor relationship I've experienced is one with Past President Mary Anne Marr, SR/WA. I had the honor of serving on the IEC with Mary Anne and I can't count the number of hour-long phone conversations we've shared. Outside of IRWA,

I can turn to Dennis Kolar, my former co-worker at RCOC, league golf partner and friend. Dennis is a board member and Past President of the County Road Association in Michigan. We have had quite a few talks on the way associations work and conduct business. I hope that Dennis has even learned a little about IRWA as the proofreader of my candidate statements. These amazing mentors and equally amazing experiences lead me to believe highly in our mentor/mentee program. I encourage you all to learn through the experiences of others and reach out. Trust me, it can work.

How would you describe IRWA's higher purpose?

When we first discussed IRWA's purpose statement, "We improve the quality of people's lives through infrastructure development," I struggled with it because I had just been told by a property owner that I had ruined his life when we placed a sidewalk close to his home as part of a road widening project. However, I took a step back and thought of all the people the project was helping. And though he had not realized it yet, I thought about how the addition of the sidewalk—though perhaps not ideal at first—would provide a level of safety for the property owner and his family. Upon reflection, I grew to believe in our purpose statement more and more because ultimately, our members provide communities with safer roads, energy for businesses and homes, water, communications and much more with infrastructure development. I would imagine that many projects face similar situations but in the end, our primary goal is to make great improvements for people and communities.



As President, what do you want our members to know?

I want the members to know that I am open to communication and certainly available for it. Both the IEC and the IGC want the best for the Association and we thoroughly observe the Association's programs and initiatives. No matter what, we are working with the best of each and every member in mind.

What role will young professionals play in IRWA's future growth?

I believe the future is here. We have past young professionals serving on the IEC. There are many YP's serving in our Chapter, Region and International committees. As members, they have made a huge impact on our Education Foundations. I was a participant of the Young Leadership Program in the early part of this millennium and this group didn't achieve the momentum that our current group has. The mentor/mentee is a program that will continue to grow the YP group as they interact with the more seasoned IRWA members.

How can the IRWA leverage technology to benefit the Association?

We have made quite a few technological advances in the past year, such as the new IRWA website, the creation of the Credentialing Concierge and more use of the IRWA Education Conference App. We are also using social media to promote job opportunities, highlight key



industry projects and promote our education and credentialing programs. This past year, the IGC approved working with a marketing team to further promote our Association and I am looking forward to the benefits from this partnership.

What would you say to an industry newcomer about career opportunities?

I would tell any industry newcomer to take advantage of the IRWA job bank with all the postings, as well as job opportunities listed on social media. Of course, this is just one of the many benefits of this Association. And as an IRWA member, it always helps to get involved. Step up and volunteer in the Chapter because the rewards and the relationships formed are both amazing and beneficial to your career. I would also promote our education classes and encourage all members of our Association to work toward our certifications

and ultimately, our SR/WA. The knowledge you gain on your journey to receiving your SR/WA will be well worth it.

What would you say is the greatest benefit of membership?

For me, the greatest benefit of being a member of the IRWA has been the opportunity to be a part of a professional organization that promotes our purpose. Our members have experience and expertise in our industry, and they are happy to share their knowledge. It is really rewarding to be part a group that has been invited to meet with FERC to assist in policy changes and influence International Ethics. Additionally, I couldn't be more pleased with our great education and credentialing program in infrastructure real estate. I am proud to be a part of the International Right of Way Association and I am honored to serve as your International President. 🌟