



Rise to the Challenge

A year ago, no one could have possibly guessed that instead of standing in front of a podium to give her speech, Sharon Slauenwhite, SR/WA, would instead be speaking to her computer screen as IRWA members around the globe tuned in for the Virtual Board of Directors Meeting.

“Many events have happened that no one could have predicted,” she began. “Today should have been a day of celebration as the last day of Conference in Minneapolis, but circumstances beyond our control prevent us from coming together in person.”

In order to prioritize the safety of IRWA members and conference attendees during the Covid-19 global pandemic, IRWA held its very first Virtual Education Conference in June of 2020. Of course, this was only one of many sudden challenges that Sharon had to face as she stepped into the role of IRWA’s International President. Despite these seemingly impossible hurdles, the Association remains strong and we know that this is largely due to Sharon’s leadership, her proactive solutions and the dedicated team that surrounds her.

“It’s obvious to everyone present that there is much work to be done to reconcile some significant differences we have amongst us, but differences of opinion and perspective can co-exist if we truly want to co-exist,” Sharon noted. “I believe we do have that desire to find common ground. I have tremendous faith in our members and I have tremendous faith in our leaders.”

There is no denying that this year will be unlike any before it. The Association has faced and will continue to face unprecedented challenges and circumstances, but one thing is clear: we stand undivided in our faith in Sharon.

“Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors,” she continued. “We will be made resilient by the challenges ahead and this year will teach us all some lessons on how to be better leaders, better world citizens and valued partners who care for one another.”

How did you first become involved in the right of way industry?

It came about in 2003 when I left a job in the private sector and joined the public service as an employee of the Properties Section of the Prince Edward Island Department of Transportation. I had been working as a title searcher and it was an opportunity to use my real property research experience as a stepping stone into a paralegal position that focused on public lands and infrastructure. To be honest, at that time, I really did not know there was a right of way industry.

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

One of the requirements of employment with the Provincial Government's Properties Section is that you be a member of the International Right of Way Association, so I joined the Association and my local Chapter as soon as I took my civil service oath and it didn't take long for me to get involved. In fact, I took my first IRWA class less than six weeks after starting that new job. Students in that first class included appraisers, negotiators, engineers, paralegals, property agents and utility project managers; that first class gave me an immediate immersion into the right of way community.

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

I enjoy being part of something that helps improve the lives of our members and the people they serve; we are working together to create opportunities for our members to take courses, to network with others, to build their knowledge of the profession and to become qualified for new positions. By extension, we ensure this great organization continues to offer those opportunities to others.

Have you experienced a meaningful mentor relationship from this Association?

I have experienced several meaningful mentor relationships. I have been fortunate that two past International Presidents, Gordon MacNair and Sandy Grigg, have offered support and encouragement to me over many years. Each have a great love for the Association, a deep respect for the membership we serve and both were always willing to offer me advice and guidance. In addition, I have enjoyed a great friendship with Colleen Brown, who I met at an International Conference—even though we are members of the same Chapter! Colleen and I seemed to follow similar leadership paths in the Association, starting at the Chapter level and then the Region level, as well as serving on the board of the Canadian Education Foundation; these shared experiences were often opportunities to learn (and laugh) together and I know if I need to bounce ideas off someone, I can always give her a call.

What was your initial impression of the IRWA and has that impression changed?

My initial impression of IRWA was that this was a community of professionals who were dedicated to learning and were willing to share their experiences and best practices with others in the knowledge that it lifts the professionalism of the entire community. Having that exposure to the vast variety of professionals engaged in right of way work, I quickly gained an appreciation for how each area of expertise intertwined and relied on the others to bring right of way projects to successful conclusions. That impression has not changed. I still feel that at its core, the IRWA is a community of passionate professionals who continue to elevate and reinvent the right of way industry through education and sharing their experiences.

An Interview with IRWA International President

SHARON SLAUENWHITE, SR/WA

BY ETHEL NAVALES

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

I became involved in IRWA leadership as many of our volunteers do: I had a desire to help my local Chapter and they welcomed me with a committee position, a project to work on and of course, a deadline to get it done! After that, I served on the Chapter Executive and then moved on to the Region when I was approached by my Region Vice Chair and asked to consider the opportunity. The decision to run for the position of the International Executive Committee (IEC) Secretary was also spurred on by others encouraging me to put my name forward. It wasn't an easy decision because I knew it would be a time and energy consuming venture, but I had enjoyed the work we had accomplished when I was on the IGC and I wanted to stay involved. Ultimately, I felt that it was important that the IEC have an International member and as a Canadian, I felt that I could add some diversity of thought and perspective to the IEC; that was what ultimately led me to run.

With the Covid-19 global pandemic, IRWA is facing unprecedented challenges. Can you speak more on how the Association has been handling the current situation and what membership can expect in the future.

At all levels of the Association, we are pulling together to be proactive in finding ways to navigate the challenges we are facing. Our Headquarters staff have made the transition to working from home, our field staff connects



virtually and by phone with our Chapters rather than having face-to-face visits, we have made adjustments to our investment holdings to better protect those funds from erratic market fluctuations, and we have adjusted our budget to reflect less travel spending and reduced classroom course income. Most importantly, we have moved quickly to offering virtual courses to ensure our members have access to the continuing education they need, and our Chapters have been supported with the option of holding a virtual class when their plans to host a course could not proceed. Membership can expect that the team at Headquarters and the volunteer leadership of the Association will continue to take a proactive approach; we will be monitoring the impact the pandemic may have on our membership numbers and are working on a new membership campaign. Additionally, we are starting the conversation about what our International Conference can look like next June if social distancing and public health restrictions continue to be in place.

Other than the global pandemic, what have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced while on the IEC and how did you address them?

One of the biggest has been the unexpected challenges of dealing with the departure of our CEO in the spring of 2019. We had to address the immediate needs of the organization over a period of 10 months while we worked to fill the position, and then we worked on the recruitment and hiring process that ultimately culminated with the hiring of our new CEO in February 2020. Personally, I felt a huge responsibility to make the right choice; the Association's membership is incredibly passionate about the organization. The person charged with guiding our staff and managing the health of the organization had to know and understand member and volunteer leader perspectives. They had to be willing to listen and truly partner with the IEC and IGC. I addressed these challenges by trusting in the experience and talent of our Headquarters staff to help us manage operations during that time, supporting our President by being her sounding board for the tough decisions and dealing with the concerns that arose during that timeframe when some of our planned projects had to be put on hold until the new CEO was on board.

We've recently focused more on our online platform. How else can the IRWA leverage technology to benefit the Association?

I think we need to explore the opportunities that a mobile app could bring to our members and the Association. Members would have access to timely communication with the Association, information about the status of their membership, as well as details on the courses and events held in their area. The Association could use it to gather data on member engagement, survey our stakeholders and push out notifications about events, meetings and classes. While a mobile app may not appeal to everyone, our newer, young professional members who rely on smartphones as their main communication tool are more likely to engage and connect with us via an app rather than our website.

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

If you'd asked me that question during a "normal" time in history, I might have a different answer, but given the circumstances we find ourselves in right now, my most immediate priorities are ensuring the Association survives and thrives during this period in time when we are facing unprecedented changes that no one could have predicted a year ago. I want to ensure our members

and Chapters have access to the courses and support they need. The virtual classes are a new offering for us, and so far they are being well-received. The IRWA education courses must be relevant and representative of the premier organization that we strive to be. I believe the work we are doing to update and improve our courses is an important priority and to that end, I am pleased that we have been able to hire an education coordinator to lend a hand with that work and I am optimistic that we will start seeing improvements quite quickly. I also want to ensure our volunteer leadership at all levels have the support needed to serve our members and Chapters, especially in these difficult times when regular contact and sharing information is critical. For members, timely advice can be found in our Right of Way Magazine featuring articles on a wide variety of solutions and suggestions on how to cope with the challenges of working during this pandemic.

How would you describe IRWA's higher purpose and how does it align with your own goals as President.

I feel very fortunate to have been part of the IEC when we created our purpose, mission and core values statement. IRWA's purpose, that we improve people's quality of life through infrastructure development, really summarizes for me the importance of our work in public infrastructure real estate and the significant impact our work has on the world. I am serving in this role because I want to ensure that those very important people—who work so hard to improve the quality of life in our communities around the world—embody the highest standards of ethical practice and have access to the best education and a community of like-minded people that share their passion for this work.

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

Well, I'm a very proud Canadian who feels quite honored to have the opportunity to serve them. While Canadians make up about 10% of the Association's membership, our volunteer ranks are generally known in the Association for being understated advocates, polite mediators and leaders who give 110% effort. My focus will be on making sure that our members and partners are getting sustained value for their engagement with IRWA, and they can look forward to new solutions to the challenges we are facing with education and networking.



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

Times are changing in the energy sector as renewable energy is gaining momentum. The need for electricity, water and telecommunication services grows as city populations grow. Pipelines are expanding and transportation infrastructure is in need of renewal. There is work to be done and it won't get done without our members. I believe that there are plenty of career opportunities in the right of way field, and they will present themselves if you put in the effort. It is said that success occurs when preparation and opportunity meet. Taking IRWA courses, attending Chapter luncheons to meet other members and make contacts, expanding your understanding of the industry by attending seminars and the Annual Education Conference, attending Young Professionals events to meet other industry newcomers and obtaining a designation are all ways you can create opportunities for meaningful work in right of way.

What impact would you like to see IRWA achieve in the next 10 years?

I would like to see IRWA's SR/WA designation become a hallmark for excellence in the right of way industry. I would like to see IRWA gain more international Chapters in countries where our ethical standards and best practices can have a positive impact on the quality of life there. I would like to see our member recruitment and Young Professional programs produce a membership roster that is reflective of the incredible diversity that exists in the countries where we live and work.

What is the greatest benefit of membership?

I believe it is the community that you become a part of. The work we do can be very difficult and often complicated. It can be stressful and very challenging. Not all negotiations are successful and not all clients are willing participants in the processes we are tasked with executing. This community understands those challenges and offers support on how to find solutions to those complicated problems. We are connected by our shared experiences, our common struggles and our desire to continue learning about how to do our jobs better and work smarter. The camaraderie is palpable wherever our members gather and it is what generates the desire to teach and share amongst our members. It's a wonderful thing. 🌟