



Leaving a Legacy

An Interview with Denise Skinner, SR/WA, and Tim Drennan, CAE

BY FRED EASTON, JR., PLS, SR/WA

As we transition from my time as International President, I thought it would be fitting to have my last article be an interview with International President-Elect Denise Skinner, SR/WA, and Executive Director Tim Drennan, CAE, who helps keeps everything moving, no matter who is at the top of the org chart. I wanted to take this time to discuss the meaning of legacy. I can say, without doubt, that none of the past International Presidents, our Advisory Council, went through this long path of leadership with establishing a legacy as the end goal — everyone I've talked to became a leader of the Association to solve a problem, improve a program or fill a leadership gap, but eventually, as the years go by, members and leaders will inevitably ask...



What do you hope your IRWA legacy will be?

Denise: This is a tough one. I didn't join the International Executive Committee with the thought of creating a legacy, so I haven't really given it much thought. I've been passionate about adding project management courses to our curriculum and creating a multiyear strategic plan so that we can have a clear direction and look at every potential initiative through the lens of how this will increase member benefit. Ultimately, I hope my legacy is that I served IRWA and its members well.

Tim: I'll be honest, like Denise, I've never thought about my legacy at IRWA. As part of staff, I focus on what we can do to support the current initiatives of the leadership and how we can ensure the resources are in place to serve the future strategic goals of the Association. However, I do want staff to feel supported during my time as Executive Director, and I hope the members feel the IRWA is in a better place after I leave than it was when I joined.

Fred: When I started my campaign as International Secretary, we quite literally had no external marketing, and our education program was stagnant, with many of our courses not having received any edits for over five years. I hope that the legacy I leave is that we got things accomplished, and I didn't have to work at it alone because we have a great team.



How do you think your current position affects your view on the legacy you leave behind?

Denise: I don't think it really does. My leadership journey all began when I decided to run for Chapter secretary, way back when, and it's led me to my current position as International President-Elect, going into the International President role next year. With each step and position, I just wanted to be able to continue to support my fellow members, who are amazing! I don't feel my current position is any different.

Tim: In my role, I make decisions that directly impact staff and sometimes the membership. These decisions will undoubtedly contribute to any legacy I leave behind, but I don't factor that in when making decisions. Decisions are based on the best information available from as many resources as possible at the time the decision is needed.

Fred: Well, with so little time left in my presidency, I worry about the things I wish I'd done more to accomplish. I wish I'd had more time to establish a strong mentoring program and a budget for leadership training.



Do you think your impact on the IRWA will be lasting or temporary?

Denise: One always hopes for a lasting impact!

Tim: My hope is that any impact I make on the Association will be seen as positive and lasting.

Fred: I think anything managed by humans is going to include some degree of change — it's in our nature, and it can be reactionary to economic conditions. We spend, grow when times are good, and if it happens long enough, we become complacent; alternatively, we shrink, save money and focus on improvements to entice new members and students when times are tight.

Many long-time members and leaders often talk about the cycle of initiatives, how everything old is new again; some are very frustrated by this, others take it in stride. Is this a bad thing?

Denise: Life in general is cyclical, so it maybe just a natural phenomenon. It maybe that it just wasn't the right time for a particular initiative, or maybe it just fell off the radar when then the next shiny new thing came along with the changing of the guard. It can be frustrating at times, and also, it's just the way things go.

Tim: I don't think revisiting past initiatives is a bad thing. However, when a past initiative is reconsidered, it is important to understand the history. There is usually one or a combination of reasons initiatives are abandoned — environmental and/or budgetary factors, lost interest from initial supporters, among others. But if those challenges no longer exist, I believe reevaluating the initiative can be useful.

Fred: Good or bad, change is inevitable and part of human nature. We react based on the times, and that can be very good, but change for change's sake isn't always a good thing.

What do you think are some of the key elements that help you succeed as a leader of IRWA and perhaps create a legacy?

Denise: The top two for me are 1) listen and 2) problem solve. You need to listen to understand what is at issue and then start looking for solutions. It is also important to recognize and empower my teams. This Association is not short of smart and very engaged individuals, and as leaders, we should be doing what we can to support, inspire and empower them as they embark on their own leadership adventures. I also have a great group of friends that have supported me and given me real feedback, both positive and "constructive," that has helped me grow as a leader.

Tim: Making an authentic effort to be transparent and collaborative, both with staff and IRWA leadership, has been invaluable, and I hope it sets an expectation for future staff leadership.

Fred: Support from my family, employer and circle of friends, which now includes the staff that I've worked with closer than many of my coworkers of over a decade. It's impossible to function in this role without that.



Any advice for future leaders of IRWA?

Denise: Enjoy the ride! The more you give or put in, the more you will get out of your time. This is applicable to all things, not just IRWA. You will meet so many wonderful and amazing people by being part of this organization!

Tim: As a leader, you will have to make important decisions that can determine the direction of the Association, and that is huge responsibility. But remember, you have other leaders and staff that want to see you succeed, so lean on their support when you need it. Oh, and remember, you are a volunteer, try to enjoy your time and have some fun — it won't last forever.

Fred: When you see something that needs fixed, put it on a list and work on those items when and where you can. There are items that came to my attention all the way back in 2013 when I was a Chapter leader that I've just now gotten movement on and are coming to fruition. Don't give up on the things you are passionate about!

Good luck in all your endeavors, Denise and Tim, and to all the leaders of our International Executive Committee, International Governing Council, Committees, Regions and Chapters. It's been a great ride, and if I started thanking everyone who helped me this past year, my time on the IEC, IGC and in Chapter leadership, well the magazine would need to be a lot longer! But a special shout out to Chapter 6: the Mile High Chapter, Chapter 12: the Illinois Chapter and Chapter 43: the Bayou Chapter for being such great hosts when we rolled into town with our leadership meetings this year! ✨

