

Collaboration and Inspiration

An Interview with International President Denise Skinner, SR/WA, PMP

On the evening of Wednesday, June 26, 2024, Denise Skinner, SR/WA, stepped to the podium and took a deep breath to steady herself. The annual conference's Closing Gala had already proven to be memorable — the ballroom was abuzz with merriment following the installation of the 2024-2025 officers, and the cheery clinking of glasses and fading murmurs created the perfect ambiance for her speech.

As Denise addressed the audience, she felt humbled to be standing there before the many amazing, gifted individuals who had chosen her to lead them. She reflected on her journey, crediting those who had opened the door for her and inspired her to be a part of something much greater than she could have ever imagined. And as she gazed out into the sea of smiling faces, she spotted those who had played key roles in helping her get to this point; and right then, she knew she wanted to do same for others who were just beginning to discover they, too, could be leaders.

She pulled up a quote from her phone to help encompass her story: "Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I may remember," she read out into the poignant silence. "Involve me, and I learn."

The crowd broke into thunderous applause, and she exhaled, committing the moment to memory. As Denise concluded her speech and thanked everyone, she exited the stage to the sound of cheers and overwhelming support — the perfect way to begin her first day as International President of IRWA.

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

I am one of those that came into right of way through a backdoor. My career started as a commercial real estate appraiser — some of my work was eminent domain work, either with TXDOT or other agency acquisition projects. Then I was hired by City of Austin as a review appraiser, which was when I became fully immersed in the right of way industry. While I was there, I managed the appraisal process for large and small infrastructure projects as well provided support to the legal department for parcels going to condemnation. I had the opportunity to sit through 25 to 30 condemnation hearings, which was really interesting. That also started my journey into project management. I really enjoy the process of identifying the problem — because really that's what a project is on a large scale — and figuring the best way to solve it, along with finding solutions to all the little problems that arise along the way.

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

Once I became involved, I discovered a joy for being a part of something bigger. Randy Williams, SR/WA, had been telling me for years that I should come to the board meetings and get involved. I fought it for a while, mostly because I didn't feel there was a purpose for me to just go and sit in on meetings. Then I was asked to be a Chapter membership co-chair, and later, I was asked to be an education co-chair, which was the position that really got me involved with the Association. I discovered I really enjoyed putting the course schedule together, and I was also working towards my SR/WA at the time, so I was coordinating as many courses as I could. Note to anyone working on your SR/WA on a budget: become an education chair or course coordinator. Trust me.

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN

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At the time, Chapter 74 sent their entire board to Spring Forums, so I had the chance to meet individuals from all over the Region, and I found fulfillment in being able to expand my professional experience and involvement within the Association.

I'm not sure that my perceptions of IRWA have really changed. While I was first getting involved, I thought, "Wow! These are some really amazing people! And I get to hang out with them! How cool is that!?" Which is basically where I still am today.

What inspired you to become a leader of IRWA?

To be honest, there was no real epiphany moment. For a long time, I considered myself to be an accidental leader. I would be involved in an organization or club, and next thing I knew, I was in a leadership position! Maybe it was a combination of subconscious innate leadership skills or simply just the inability to say no when it came to being a part of something bigger than myself, but at the end of the day, more than anything, I wanted to get more involved and grow as a professional, and becoming a leader on the Chapter, Region and International levels was the right fit for my own journey.



Did you have any mentors who guided you along the way?

There are so many people I looked up to and wanted to emulate along my journey: my former boss John Coleman, who mentored me as a baby appraiser; John Reed, SR/WA; and Randy Williams, SR/WA, who encouraged me to run for office; Teri Morgan, SR/WA, who I followed up the chain in both Chapter 74 and Region 2, always handled everything so calmly and brought a voice of reason to the table; also, Kristen Short, SR/WA, Krista Chambers, SR/WA, and Cyndi Whelpley, SR/WA, who are all dynamos! More recently, the International Executive Committee (IEC) members, both past and present, who I have served with, have all served as inspirations to me. And so many, many more! We all learn and grow through those we choose to surround ourselves with. I have been fortunate to be surrounded by some truly wonderful and smart human beings.

What has been your proudest achievement to date?

I am proud to have worked on the Strategic Planning Task Force and getting action on project management courses. Kudos to Janet Walker, SR/WA, Amir Vafamanesh and the whole International Professional Education Committee (IPEC)! They listened to the need for adding project management modules to existing courses. Currently, IPEC is working on the development of three new project management courses and has the outline of a pathway that can be rolled out when the courses are completed.

At the first International Governing Council (IGC) meeting after joining the IEC, I facilitated a half-day Strategic Planning workshop where IGC members reviewed the strategic goals and brainstormed ideas to develop leadership, increase education opportunities and provide greater member benefits that would align with IRWA's strategic goals. The Strategic Planning Task Force had several initiatives that had come from the membership, which were included and prioritized in discussions. This was essential because it provided initiatives that were coming from the members for the members in addition to giving IRWA a common goal. It was great to be a part of creating the initiatives that have been developed over my term on the IEC.

What is the best advice you've received and how has that shaped your leadership style?

The absolute best piece of advice I have ever received was from one of the professors on my orals board in grad school. He taught us to admit it when we didn't know the answer. He said it was better to say "I don't know" or "I don't remember" than to try to make up an answer. That is a nugget of wisdom that has served me well over the years. Telling a landowner or client you don't know the answer, but will find out and get back with them, builds trust.



How would you describe IRWA's higher purpose, and how does that align with your leadership goals?

Our purpose statement is we make people's lives better through infrastructure development. When you look behind that statement to see what it takes — integrity, education, dedication to excellence — that's what resonates with me. What we do is also a collaborative effort — from routing, troubleshooting, listening to landowner concerns, and looking for how we will impact a landowner the least, to how we can make the process as seamless as possible and get them everything they are entitled to.

What are some of the immediate priorities you'd like to address as International President?

For me one of the first priorities is to update the Strategic Plan. Many of the initiatives that were created on the previous round have either been completed or are in process of completion. As an Association, we need to be intentional in what we do and make sure that everything is evaluated through the lens of how it fits into our strategic goals. Does it increase educational opportunities? Does it increase the quality of our educational offerings? Does it bring value to the members?

What is the best way to engage those outside of the right of way industry?

By showing up and being proud of what we do and who we are as professionals. The members of our Association are the best at what they do, and it shows. Attending events like AASHTO, SAME and others will give other professionals exposure to who we are. Continuing to engage and interact with FHWA and CRE

on the Canadian side, as well as other governmental agencies, is so important. I think as much as anything, we need to be a consistent presence and a resource for those agencies and their stakeholders.

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

That I have a very irreverent sense of humor and truly care about this association and its members. I am hoping that this next year will be fun, while also making decisions that will have a lasting impact on the Association. I don't mean to be frivolous when I say have fun, but really, as volunteers, we should take some enjoyment and pride in our involvement and in what we are creating. There are also decisions that will need to be made to keep us focused on where we want to be — not where we are now or even next year, but where do we want to be in 5 years, 10 years, 20 years and beyond? How do we effectively communicate and bring in new people to this industry as well as uphold the standards that have contributed to our success?

What is the greatest benefit of membership?

The greatest benefit to membership is the people! Being a member provides so many opportunities to network and connect with others in this industry. If I have a unique acquisition question, maybe there is someone else who has had a similar situation. Or maybe they haven't, but they can still be a resource that I can problem solve with. Maybe they have or know of a job opportunity that will allow you to expand your skill set. Most of my best friends I have made through my involvement in IRWA, and I am thankful to have been given that experience. 🌟