



LEADERSHIP IS AGELESS

The value of seasoned professionals

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

The right of way industry, in recent years, has had a significant amount of attention and discussion focused on recruiting and developing younger generations for leadership roles within the industry, including by this author. Undoubtedly, this attention and discussion is warranted, given the average ages of those in the professions comprising our industry; mature industry professionals are imminently facing retirement or have already retired and left the industry. But another end of the spectrum for leadership exists.

Celebrating Senior Leaders Who Made an Impression

Last year, I reconnected with a friend from my youth, Martha, shortly after her 99-year-old father passed away. I learned about her father's leadership contributions throughout his life, which I previously did not know. This new knowledge precipitated thoughts about how those older and wiser can continue leading in some capacity, including pursuing leadership roles if they have not previously done so.



Martha's father, Carl Wm. Henn, Jr.

Martha and I first met as members of Girl Scout Troop 62. We later attended middle school and high school together and both worked at the now-closed Renee's French Restaurant in the Indianapolis Broad Ripple neighborhood. She was the third youngest of nine children, eight girls and one boy. One of my memories of Martha's father, which is etched fondly in my mind forever, is when I would spend the night at her house, and this father of eight daughters would chuckle and say, "This is great. Tonight I have another daughter." When I recently recounted this memory of Martha's father to her, she told me that I was not the only friend to whom her father made this comment. Although I was not surprised by Martha's revelation, years later, I still find her father's comment endearing.

I attended the memorial service for Martha's father and listened intently to his children and friends pay homage to him and honor a lifetime of remarkable leadership in his U.S. Army military service, newspaper and public relations career and a multitude of professional, charitable and social organizations. After I left the funeral home, I carefully read his obituary, which was replete with his leadership contributions, most notably even in the later years of his life.

In my profession as a lawyer, on more than one occasion, I have encountered more mature colleagues who have served and continue to serve in leadership positions. I recall one such leader in my profession who I met early in my career about 30 years ago and left a lasting impression. I participated in a hearing in Indianapolis before Marion Superior Court No. 7. At the beginning of the hearing, my opposing counsel, John Morton-Finney, an elderly African American man, rose to his feet and passionately represented his client with all the fire and brimstone he could muster. Toward the end of his argument before the court, he took a deep breath and gently made a request to the judge. "Your Honor, I am in my 99th year and do not have the same energy that I once did. Would you mind if I continued my argument seated at counsel table?"

Initially, I was intrigued by this gentleman, not only because he was approaching one century in age and still practicing law but also because he began his legal career when people of color had extremely limited opportunities to do so. Sometime after the memorable hearing with him, I read in an "Indianapolis Star" article that Morton-Finney had earned not one, but two, law degrees — one in 1935 and the second in 1944 — in addition to 11 undergraduate degrees. Between his service in the 24th U.S. Infantry Regiment and the American Expeditionary Force in World War I, one of Morton-Finney's early leadership roles was a teacher for the newly created Crispus Attucks High School, part of the Indianapolis Public School system. When he retired from the practice of law at the age of 106, Morton-Finney was the oldest attorney practicing law in the United States.

Within our IRWA family, numerous longtime Association leaders continue to provide leadership support. In my home Chapter, Indiana Chapter 10, Bill Wermund, SR/WA, who has been an IRWA member for more than 50 years, exemplifies the contributions that seasoned leaders can make to the Association. Since I have been involved with Chapter 10, I have known that Wermund has been the founder of Negotiations, Inc., a right of way acquisition company, a past Chapter 10 president, parliamentarian and membership committee chairman and most notably, he has portrayed a jolly Santa Claus every year at the Chapter 10 Christmas Party.

On a blustery Veteran's Day last year, I had the privilege of interviewing Wermund for this article and, by doing so, gained additional insight into his dedication to the right of way industry. The fact that Wermund and I talked on Veteran's Day is significant, because during our conversation, I learned he had served our country in the U.S. Army for two years in the mid-1960s. He joined IRWA as a member in 1969 at the suggestion of the office supervisor at Indiana Bell, where he was employed at that time. After he retired from Indiana Bell in 1997, he started Negotiations, Inc. He has been Chapter 10 president twice and held all other Chapter offices except for treasurer. Additionally, he was a committee chair for the IRWA International Education Conference when it was held in Indianapolis in 2009 and a member of the International Membership Committee for a couple of years until it was disbanded. Wermund has been awarded the Chapter 10 Professional of the Year two times and received recognition for his IRWA membership after 25, and later 50, years.



Leaving a Legacy

Wermund's daughter, Laura Wermund Santos, SR/WA, has followed in her father's footsteps, both in becoming a professional in the right of way industry and a member and leader of Chapter 10. Santos, also a past Chapter 10 president, is currently the Chapter 10 newsletter editor. Wermund said, "It makes me happy that she thinks highly of the right of way industry." He noted that he and his daughter are one of the few father-daughter SR/WA teams in the Association.

The impact of a parent's experience as an IRWA leader in the right of way profession has a powerful impact on his or her children. At the 2021 IRWA Annual International Education Conference, parent-child relationships in the right of way industry were recognized more than once. Incoming IRWA



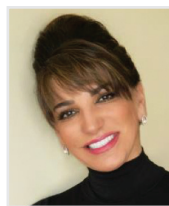
Bill Wermund, SR/WA, and his daughter, Laura Wermund Santos, SR/WA

International President Jake Farrell, SR/WA, had a poignant moment at the International Board of Directors meeting when he honored his father, Paul Farrell, a past Chapter 78 president. Also touching was when David Brooks accepted the Ronald Jourdan SR/WA Advancement Award bestowed upon his mother, Carol Brooks, SR/WA, who tragically passed away in February 2021, during the Awards Ceremony and spoke about how his mother had inspired him professionally.

The significance of leaving a legacy is not limited to parents and their children in the industry. As not only the first female attorney to be elected Chapter 10 president, but the first ethnically diverse individual to serve in that capacity, I felt an immense responsibility. During challenging periods I confronted during my term, I reminded myself that it was not just about me and my ability to forge ahead during those onerous times. Rather, I knew that not just serving in the role of Chapter president, but how I served, would set an example for other Chapter members who aspired to be leaders and are ethnically and racially diverse.

The Significant Contributions that Seasoned Professionals Can Provide

Some longtime industry leaders have already retired, and others are spending less time working. As such, they are now blessed with time they did not have when they were younger and more intensely involved in their careers. Many have served in leadership roles, not only in the Association, but also as founders, owners and managers of industry businesses and other organizations. Their leadership experiences are invaluable to younger generations. These mature professionals have the ability to contribute to and support leadership in several ways — whether it be in a new or renewed leadership role, as a formal or informal mentor to younger industry professionals or through fellowship at Association meetings and events. As Wermund said during his interview, "I urge incoming leaders to lean on the expertise gained by the people who have been there." Likewise, I encourage those "who have been there" to contribute in a meaningful way to the professional lives of younger and emerging Association leaders. As I transition into my senior years, I look forward to embracing ways that I can not only serve, but support and nurture others in our Association's leadership. 🌱



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