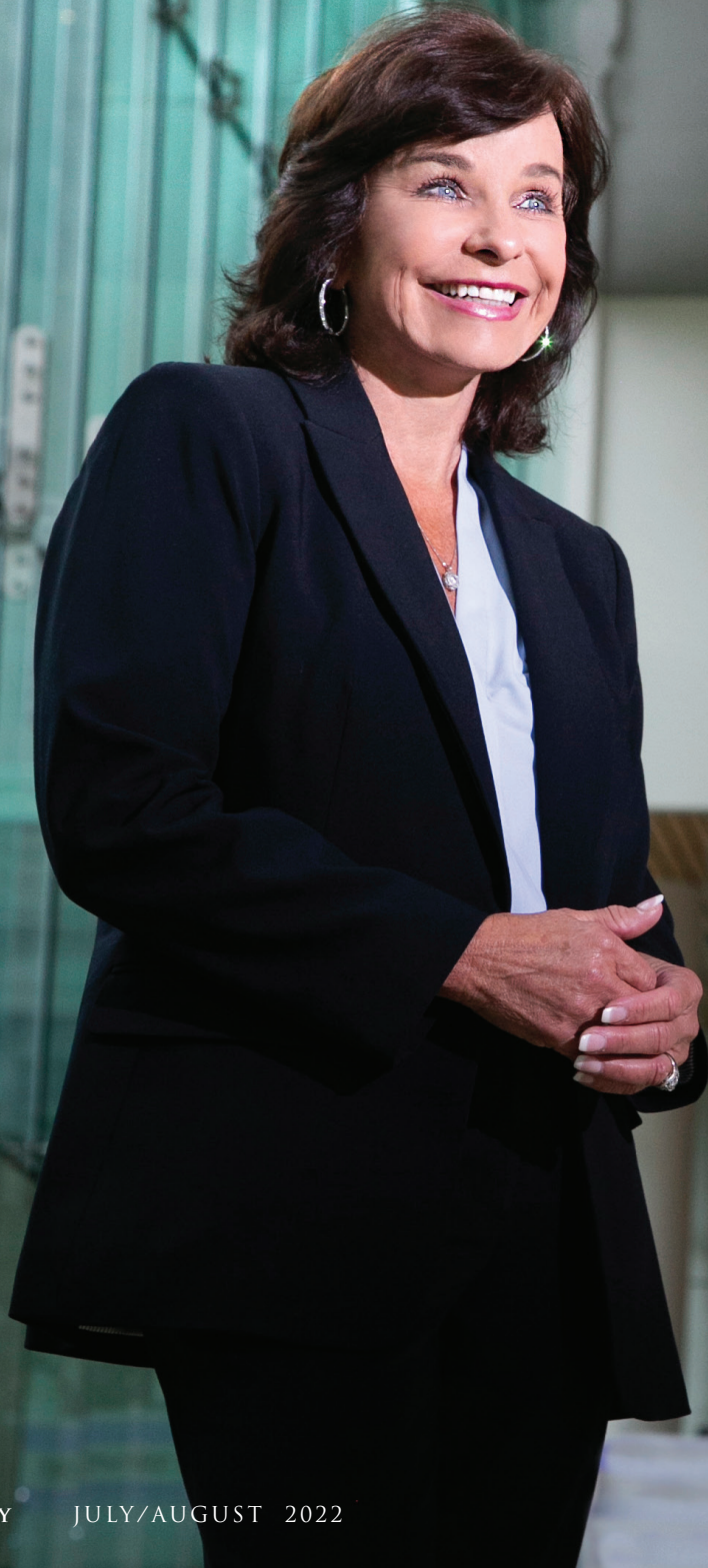


MEMBERSHIP Growth





An Interview with IRWA International President

JUDY JONES, SR/WA

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN

Members who have crossed paths with Judy Jones, SR/WA, have known her as an Alabama sweetheart with a southern charm. But those close to her know there is also an unshakeable passion within her for IRWA and its members, that when paired with her tenacity, make her a force to be reckoned with. It is this considerable strength that has guided her throughout her years of service as a leader of the Association.

When she stood up for what she believed in at the Annual International Education Conference in Edmonton with her dear friend, Jake Farrell, SR/WA, by her side, she had no idea where this journey would take her. Along the way, many members influenced and shaped her as a leader, and in return, she inspired many young women to follow in her footsteps.

And when Judy Jones, SR/WA, took the stage during the Closing Gala at the 68th Annual International Education Conference in Cleveland, she looked upon all the faces of those who supported her since that fated day in Edmonton, and she realized she was surrounded by not only her fellow members and friends, but her family.

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

In 1988, I was hired by my current employer, Goodwyn Mills Cawood, LLC, (GMC) as a paralegal. GMC is an engineering and architectural company, and my job included preparation of legal documents, such as protective covenants, easements, as well as making presentations at planning commission and city council meetings for rezoning, subdivision plat and development plan approvals. Also, I would oftentimes have to acquire easements or fee simple acquisitions on our municipal water and sewer projects.

How did you discover IRWA?

It was an accident. I was actually playing golf with a client, Wayne Sullivan, former county engineer for Jefferson County, Alabama, and we began discussing property acquisition on a particular project. I mentioned to him that I was thinking of activating my real estate license (which I had placed on inactive status) due to our legislature contemplating requiring a person to hold an active real estate license in order to acquire right of way. At that point, Wayne said to me, “You know there’s a right of way association, right?” From there, I reached out to IRWA Alabama Chapter 24’s membership chair, and the rest is history.

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

I attended my first Chapter meeting on May 8, 2003. Everyone was extremely polite and welcoming. When I first joined, my Chapter had well over 200 people. Unfortunately, many have retired or are no longer with us. In recent years, my perception changed of the leadership at IRWA Headquarters that developed a distrust due to a lack of transparency. However, starting with the election of Jake Farrell, SR/WA, and my appointment to the International Finance Committee, many positive changes have been made.

Have you experienced a meaningful mentor relationship within the Association?

Oh my! There have been many. I would have to start with Larson D. Edge, SR/WA. Larson was a long-time member of my Chapter for many, many years. In 2006, I received a telephone call from Larson, and he asked me if I would serve as Chapter secretary. Silence. Larson asked, "Judy, are you still there? I've never known you to be speechless!" Having been asked to serve by Larson did have me speechless, but I gladly accepted. Before he hung up the phone, he said, "Make me proud." Larson passed away in 2011, and every step of my leadership has been made in hopes I have made him proud.



Donna Crosby, SR/WA, our first female International President, has no idea the impact she made on this Association back in the '90s when she stepped up and ran for the IEC. As she explained to me, it was hard. But she persevered and made a tremendous mark on the Association for all the future women leaders who followed. On top of that, she's from right here in my hometown, Montgomery, Alabama!

Carol Croft, SR/WA, is a person I hold in the highest esteem. She is my mentor, and more importantly, my friend. You know how there is that person that you look up to without them even knowing it? That's how I felt about Carol. I knew who she was but doubted she really knew me. However, when I was elected Region 6 secretary/treasurer about 10 years ago, I received a handwritten letter from Carol congratulating me and telling me she was confident in my ability to lead our Region. Until now, she probably didn't have a clue what that one letter meant to me. When I am overwhelmed and need someone to talk to, Carol is always there.

Past International Presidents Faith Roland, SR/WA, and Pat Petitto, SR/WA, are two of my mentors as well. Anytime I needed information regarding what the IEC did in the past, I would always call Faith. Faith became my sounding board and close friend when I ran for office on the IEC. She has been there for me during my IEC journey and always reassured me with three words: "you got this!" Pat has been that quiet voice of encouragement. When she became International President, Alabama Chapter 24 was her first Chapter visit. I was outgoing Chapter president, and she told me I should run for Region office. "I'm not running for Region!" was my reply. Fast forward to Pat's first Region forum as International President, there I was, being elected secretary/treasurer for Region 6. She also told me I should not stop after I ran from the floor in Edmonton for an IEC position. Now, here I am.

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

I never aspired to be on the IEC. I was going to complete my service at the Region level and be done. I had served five years as a Chapter officer and six years as a Region officer and thought I was done. Then, there was the annual conference in Edmonton when everything changed. Our Association was in a bad place with past administration and needed fixing. That's when I decided my IRWA leadership journey was not over.

What has been your proudest achievement to date?

Personally, my proudest two achievements are my son, Donald Ray "Dray" Owens, III (and his wife Skye) and my daughter, Anna Owens Greene (and her husband Jeff). Raising your children to love and honor God and seeing them grow up to be godly parents and successful adults is, well, no better feeling. Greater

still is being blessed to be “JuJu” to my four (almost five) beautiful granddaughters: Hadyn Rae, Mary Charles, Mallie Claire, McKinley Caroline and, due in August, Carnley Rae.

With IRWA, these past three years on the IEC have been my proudest. Change and transparency was needed in the Association. Working together as a team with the IGC and the IEC to bring about these changes has been most gratifying. Have we always agreed? No. But in the end, the decisions made are for the betterment of the Association, and we will continue to uphold that progress.

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

Don't stop the momentum that has been created with the IGC. Through the leadership of immediate Past International President Jake Farrell, SR/WA, a strategic plan, along with a Strategic Plan Committee, has been put in place. Now, we need to work the plan, starting with membership. I have challenged each of us to bring in at least one new member. If it means sponsoring that new member, we need to do it. Our greatest assets are our Chapters — it all starts there.

I also plan to bring back the Federal Agency Update meeting. We have excellent federal partners that we must have more engagement with to find out how we can work together on various programs.

Our committees also play a major role in our Association, although clear direction is needed. By aligning our committee leaders with specific direction, it will have a domino effect down to every member of the Association. More seminars and webinars will be provided. Curriculum will be updated, modified or rewritten. The goal is for each of our courses be given a thorough review. Our education should be the best there is to offer in the industry.

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

“We improve people's lives through infrastructure development” is our purpose. During the 34 years in which I have worked for Goodwyn Mills Cawood, LLC, (GMC), an engineering & architectural firm, I have lived this purpose everyday through my projects. GMC's purpose is Building Communities. When we strive to improve people's lives and we build communities, we are bound to make the world a better place.

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

One of my priorities this year is bringing back the Federal Agency Update. This is an event where various federal agencies come together with a wealth of knowledge regarding current and new federal programs that each of us, as right of way professionals, need to understand. By reopening these lines of communication, we can work together with educational programming moving forward. This event will also bring in others outside of our industry as well.



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

Three years ago, when I was elected International Secretary, I stood in front of the members present and promised to work hard for our members every day. I have kept that promise, and I will continue to do so. To say the last few years have been hard, complicated and complex is truly an understatement. My commitment is simple: I will continue to bring my genuine self in everything I do. I will give my full measure of devotion, kindness, caring and grace. And I ask the same from each of you. We have made great strides to build trust. I will try to stay out of the weeds and look above the horizon, to a future where each year we grow and adapt to what lies ahead. As leaders, we must stay focused on our members — the current ones and our new ones. The members deserve our best selves! I will stay focused on our core values of ethics, education and fair treatment of all who are impacted by our work. I commit my authentic self each and every day.

What is the greatest benefit of membership?

Without a doubt, the greatest benefit of membership in the IRWA is our members. When you become a member, a new world is within your reach. You now have a wealth of knowledge in the palm of your hand and new friendships that will last you the rest of your life. 🌟