

# A Flourishing Foundation for Education

An Interview with RWIEF President Leslie Finnigan, SR/WA

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN

*In 1976, the Association voted to adopt a separate nonprofit foundation known as the Right of Way International Education Foundation. The main purpose of the Foundation was to raise and manage funding for education courses through programs, scholarships and awards to IRWA members. For almost 50 years, RWIEF has been a critical partner to IRWA in its support of the Association's education initiatives and course offerings. As such, we invited RWIEF President Leslie Finnigan, SR/WA, to share her thoughts on the Foundation and where it stands today.*



## What do you think makes the Foundation so special?

This is a special group of dedicated, energetic individuals who believe in the purpose of the Foundation. We have a really simple focus, and that is to raise money for furthering education endeavors for IRWA members. Our second charge is to maintain and protect those funds, again, for our members. The Foundation is successful because of the character and diversity in our group. There is also continuity in the membership. We have both seasoned members and a newer group of trustees. Most trustees, with the exception of the Young Professional (YP) trustees, continue on the Foundation because they feel the importance of what we do. The experience and history they bring really helps as new trustees are brought on. The YP trustees have a 3-year term. Each year, the third-year trustee rotates off the Foundation, and a new YP comes on. I think the YP trustee has brought an extra element to the Foundation that really is unique.





### **What has been the most rewarding aspect of serving as President of the Foundation?**

I have found that helping our IRWA members through scholarship programs is tremendously rewarding. The support we have received from the membership regarding the scholarships has pointed out how important these opportunities are to those seeking further education and/or obtaining their credentials. We believe that more and more members are also more aware of RWIEF through the actions of the Foundation over the past few years, and that has encouraged participation in the fundraising efforts that take place each year, as well as the support in Foundation activities.

### **Last year, RWIEF announced the Carol A. Croft Finish Line Memorial Scholarship, which provided funding for SR/WA candidates who were within two courses of completing their designation. What has been the feedback you've gotten from that scholarship?**

There was a lot of surprise by the announcement of this scholarship since it was awarded without any application process. The criteria were determined by the Foundation, and individuals were then automatically awarded the scholarship if they met those criteria. The feedback from those who received the scholarship has been very rewarding. We have been asked if we are going to do it again, but at this point, this particular scholarship isn't scheduled for a repeat. I

understand that there are already several of our members, as of the first of February, who have already completed the courses to get their SR/WA. I really hope that they are in Long Beach and get to walk across the stage and accept their SR/WA certificate. We hope to have more numbers at the Foundation Spring meeting in March. It would really be a tribute to Past RWIEF President Carol Croft, SR/WA, if all the awardees obtained their SR/WA this year.

### **Can you take us behind the scenes and give us an idea of what goes into creating a new scholarship?**

This is really a collaborative and creative effort of the trustees with some ideas from our IRWA members. We often get suggestions outside the Foundation that are brought to use for consideration. The Foundation meets in person in the fall and in the spring as well as the annual conference. We have one day of workshop during the fall and spring meetings where we work on a variety of Foundation issues. In addition to discussing potential scholarships, we weigh the cost and how the scholarship would be applied. As with any group, a lot of brainstorming and discussion takes place until we have what we need to present to the members. We can't forget that we also reach out to IRWA for their support. We can put forth the scholarship, but IRWA must administer the scholarship.



## What are some of RWIEF's current focuses and goals?

Currently, we are working on the annual Monday Night Event at the annual conference in Long Beach and reaching out to sponsors for both the Monday Night Event and the Golf Tournament. The Foundation has committees for the Monday Night Event and Golf Tournament, and they have been hard at work for several months now. We are also going to be reviewing the status of all the previous scholarships to see how much of the dedicated funds for those scholarships have been expended. It is a constant balancing game, making sure we track what we've set aside with what has been used. IRWA CFO Rakhshan Mazarei plays a big role in helping us do just that, but this is important information when trying to determine what we can offer for new scholarships, which we know are of great interest to IRWA members. We are also anticipating some additional requests for funding of new courses from the Association this spring. This has always been a focus for the Foundation, but the requests come from IRWA with a plan well developed. We know the International Professional Education Committee has been working hard developing some new programs and will be seeking funding for them.

Another goal we have is to try to get out our message to more of the membership in IRWA. I think we have been successful to a point, but with new members and new leaders, many still don't understand what the benefits are in what the Foundation does and the importance of all the work we do, such as the new courses, updated courses and the scholarship program. Articles like this are a big help in getting the word out, but we have a couple of trustees on the Foundation who work really hard on our website materials and distributing information about the Foundation to the Regions and Chapters.

**Wow, it's great to hear that RWIEF has been so hard at work trying to support our members' education goals. I know many of us are excited for the RWIEF events at conference this June. Can you give attendees an idea of what to expect if they register for the events?**

We have got some amazing activities planned for Long Beach conference, starting with the Monday Night Event. This year, we have exclusive use of the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach for the evening — and it's an easy walking distance from the Long Beach Convention Center. This is a beautiful facility, and our members can enjoy all the exhibits (both indoor and outdoor), partake in good food and beverages, enjoy live music and participate in both the live and silent auction. The Committee is also working on a couple of other ideas for the evening, so stay tuned. We anticipate this event will be a lot of fun and a great opportunity to network and enjoy a spectacular display of marine life. It is also very family friendly!

The Golf Tournament, called the Pacific Coast Golf Classic this year, is on Tuesday, June 25 and is close to the conference activities as well. Transportation to the El Dorado Park Golf Course will be provided. It is a public course and is beautifully maintained. Be sure to sign up as soon as registration opens on March 1, as the limit for this event is 144 golfers total.

Lastly, we are holding our Ride for the Foundation FUNdraiser again this year. Special shout-out to Steve Grandon for his work on this every year.

For more information on these events, please visit [www.rwief.org](http://www.rwief.org).





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## How can members become involved with the Foundation?

The Foundation has a limited number of trustees, but we are always happy to have help with any of our activities. Our meetings are open to members, and we would encourage anyone to come to one or more of the Foundation meetings, especially the one at the conference. Volunteers are always welcome, too, and if you have ideas or questions, please come, and talk to us. Requests for new courses always come through IRWA. We don't create courses; we just fund them. However, some of the best ideas come from discussions that start out as a simple suggestion.

## What can members of IRWA do to support RWIEF's cause?

That's easy, come to our events. We want to see as many people as possible at these fundraisers. Have fun with the auctions and play golf. These events are for our members, and by participating, you are helping raise money for the Foundation, all while having a good time and making new friends. The donations that members make at the annual Board of Directors meeting have always been a contributing factor to our financial ability, as well as being a

sponsor at the Golf Tournament or the Monday Night Event. When members donate to the Foundation, this money is really going back to them through new courses or scholarships.

## What do you see for RWIEF's future?

I think the future will bring more opportunities for the Foundation to help our members with their education, not only with more scholarship opportunities going to more members but with increased and up-to-date courses. As I said before, we are always looking for opportunities to help the educational growth of our members. We fundraise so we can do more with the ideas that come to us through suggestions that can be turned into actions. I've often been told by the trustees who came before me that the funds we have belong to the members, we are their savings account, and we use that money to invest in their education and future. 🌟