



WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE RIGHT OF WAY INDUSTRY?

Do today's youth realize they hold the future in their hands?

BY PATRICK MCCALLISTER, SR/WA

These are both great questions and very concerning questions for some. From conversations I have had with older (I mean ... *more experienced*) members of our Association, this has been a hot topic for quite a while. But is there a real, clear direction of how to get today's youth into our industry, and is there anything really being done about it?

Well, back in the day, it was always a running joke in my family that no one really knew what I did for a living. And while maybe it wasn't entirely true, there was some truth to it. For the most part, they knew I worked for an engineering company that worked on roads—so I think it was assumed that I was an engineer. I mean, I think kids in every family know they have





an Aunt Jean who has been a nurse for 20 years, or an Uncle Ben who is a dentist or a Cousin Billy who works at the factory across town. But how many families have kids who know they have an Uncle Ron who acquires the land needed to build roads?

As I think back on it, did I take the time to explain what I really did, and what was all involved with it? I am not sure I did. I mean, I do now, maybe to the point of annoyance to some. But how many years and young people did I miss out on in their formative years, when I could have been trying to lead them to this wonderful and rewarding industry? The more I got involved with the Association and had conversations with these more experienced members, it really started to set in — I needed to do what I could to give back to this industry that has given me so much. Additionally, I wanted to do what I could to make sure the health of this industry continues to be strong as I inch towards retirement.

The question was, *how?* How and what is the best way to really get the word out to these young people? I'm still not really sure that I have found the best answer to that question. So, three years ago, I created a program to go out and talk about our industry and the professions it involves to as many high schools and colleges that would have me about our industry and the professions it involves. And after the first couple of presentations, I found that I really loved going out and talking to the students about our field. I found that my suspicions were correct — they had no idea about the industry. Unfortunately, the pandemic has slowed this down a little bit, but I will get back to it once everything opens back up.

But then the question in my mind lately has been: could I be spreading the word about our industry more, just in everyday conversations I have outside of my work environment? I mean, when people ask me now what I do, they better sit back and relax for a while because I am going to tell them. But am I actively engaging these conversations, especially to people who I know have young teens who may be starting to look at what they want to do for a career? Probably not. It seems to me that for our industry to survive, we need to teeter the line between proactively promoting our industry and annoyance.

Something else also hit me a couple of weeks ago. While I was watching our state's high school basketball state finals on TV, there were commercials from a labor union targeting the youth watching the same commercial that I was. They were telling young people the benefits of these trades and how they could get involved. My thought was, *wow, what a great way to get your message to these kids.* Now, my mind is turning on what else can we do to "advertise" our industry.

What is exciting to me is that recently, the Indiana Department of Transportation Real Estate Director Tom Geibel reached out to me once he heard about my student outreach. INDOT has immediate concerns about industry staffing as well as long-range concerns and wants to discuss how INDOT and Indiana Chapter 10 can work together to promote the industry.

I also think that we, as members, are our own best advocates. What I truly love about this industry is that we are very passionate people about what we do — that when we all are able to get together at Chapter meetings, Region forums or the Education Conference, we love to talk about projects and situations we have had. These conversations turn into lasting friendships. Now, we need to turn that into having these conversations with people outside of our industry. ✪



Patrick McCallister, SR/WA, is the right of way acquisition manager for WSP USA Inc. in Indianapolis with 28 years experience in the right of way industry. He is a past president of Indiana Chapter 10 and presented at the 2017 and 2018 International Education Conferences on the management of right of way acquisition. Patrick currently serves as the Region 5 secretary/treasurer.