



# Young Professional of the Year

## Jesse Ray, SR/WA

### Tell us a little about your background as a right of way professional.

I entered the industry in 2012 before the Seattle Education Conference. A family friend in the Eminent Domain field recommended me to a growing ROW Company. My undergraduate degree was in finance, and like most, I didn't see myself working in this industry; I was interviewing with investment firms and commercial banks assuming I would work in a "compliance department," somewhere with rows of low cubicle walls.

After interviewing with Past International President Faith Rowland, SR/WA, Faith asked if I was interested in coming back the next day. When I agreed, assuming it was for additional conversation interviews, Faith explained that I would be starting my first day. The environment was laid back, different from what I was used to or expecting, everyone was inviting and willing to teach. I've never looked back!

### Congratulations on winning this prestigious award! What was your initial reaction when you found out that you were selected as Young Professional of the Year?

I'm experiencing imposter syndrome, but I am incredibly humbled and honored to have received the Young Professional of the Year award. Having been inspired by members like Matt Eckmann, SR/WA, and Brody Allen, SR/WA, on the type of impact I wanted to have in this industry, I am grateful to receive this honor.





I certainly don't feel like I have all the answers, but I remind myself, "When will you ever really know it all?" That is my motivation to learn and grow in the industry.

### **What difference has IRWA and the connections you've made influenced your career?**

IRWA has made all the difference in my career. I have a great support system and made amazing connections in Chapter 4 and Region 7. They have amplified the Association's impact. Many of my professional connections transitioned quickly into my personal life! Traditionally, I kept a firewall between work and "real" life, but since connecting with IRWA, I see greater value added to both areas of my life. I learned you are more of an effective negotiator when you bring your authentic self to work and the challenges you tackle.

As an IRWA member, I have the opportunity to connect with members, some of whom are competitors, willing to share experiences and expertise with me. Many mentorship moments occur out of casual conversations. The comradery is unmatched.

### **What led you to commit to the work of obtaining an SR/WA designation, and how do you feel that education supports your career?**

When I joined the industry and IRWA, I took education courses at the direction of company leadership. But my work ethic leads me to intense commitment, so achieving my SR/WA designation felt like natural progression.

### **What was your favorite part of the conference this year?**

My favorite part of the conference was the Finnegan Fun Run. Even though I started feeling ill, committing to participate is something I've decided to do annually. Odd as it may sound, I have a passion for running, so partnering with friends, like Derrick Roma, SR/WA, and others, is always a good time and something I'll continue for conferences to come.

The Fun Run gets people outside of their networking personality and focused more on having fun. I encourage others to participate!

### **If you could do one thing, leave one mark, on the right of way industry, what would it be?**

COVID-19 and the post-COVID-19 environment has presented increased challenges on our industry. People came into the industry without the benefit of shadowing experienced professionals and receiving hands-on training that I received coming into the industry. I would support creating a pipeline program for new agents and upcoming professionals.

After learning the Japanese concept of "Kaizen," I am committed to "continuous improvement" and would like that to be the mark I leave this industry. Incremental, positive changes lead to big rewards.

### **What can IRWA do to support young professionals within the Association better?**

Having served with the YPs at the Regional and International level, I understand there are significant challenges to a top-down approach and acknowledge that the greatest areas for success are at the local levels. However, I appreciate and have learned during my time serving as the International YP Committee Vice Chair that a YP "tool kit", a bare-bones resource focused on the development of a YP Committee or college and student outreach on the local level can support our YPs across the Association.

Also, having greater flexibility from Headquarters as the Young Professionals create an effective strategy that allows us to "fail forward," I think, will present greater opportunities for collaboration to support existing YPs and attract others to our industry.

### **What are some goals you have for yourself in the next five years?**

During a discussion with IRWA's CFO Rahkshan Mazarei at the conference, he shared that I should consider being an instructor, that may be the next step in my career and the Association. I am still honing my presentation skills and expanding my industry knowledge, but I see that being a natural next step for me. Personally, I'm getting married in August and look forward to dedicating my time to family and continuing to elevate my professional career in right of way.

### **Lastly, these past few years, the importance of mentorship and connections, both personal and professional, have been a highlight of everyone's story. Can you share with us who you look to for guidance and mentorship?**

I have known many mentors and members who have provided me with guidance in my career, I undoubtedly know that Faith Roland, SR/WA, is someone from whom I seek guidance and mentorship. As my first boss in the industry, I learned so much from her. I was honored to hear how proud she was of me for receiving this award. Faith always supported and encouraged my growth in the industry; this accomplishment is no different. I hope to continue to make my support system proud! 🌟