

# NO LONGER A “YP,” THEN WHAT?

Climbing the next rung

BY AMANDA P. VANDE VOORDE, RWP

I became an IRWA member in 2016 and quickly found myself standing on the first rung of the IRWA leadership ladder — the very first, Chapter-level rung. Eager to impress a new boss and too shy to say no, I voluntarily accepted the role of Chapter 41 treasurer, solemnly swearing to always balance the checkbook and reconcile the QuickBooks.

Prior to taking my first oath of office at 28 years old, my résumé was a hodgepodge of life experiences, from working as a veterinary technician in Santa Monica to assisting with a disaster recovery program on Staten Island. I also worked on a dairy farm briefly: a homeschool tutor by day and a cow fertility specialist by night. It's safe to say my job progression wasn't exactly conforming to any rules. And although this cocktail of occupations did provide me with some relevant experience with acquiring land rights, IRWA is really what exposed me to the right of way industry and finally established my career path.



*“The rung of a ladder was never meant to rest upon, but only to hold a man's foot long enough to enable him to put the other somewhat higher.”*

*—Thomas Huxley*

My age and a short tenure in the profession made me an ideal candidate for the IRWA Young Professionals Group. What started as an opportunity to represent YPs from my local Chapter has since developed into a much larger opportunity. A reclassification from “group” to “committee” and several strategic goals later, I now get to represent my fellow Young Professionals as the International YP Vice Chair. I often think back to the moment that really sparked my excitement and motivated me to get more involved with IRWA and, more specifically, with the Young Professionals Committee. Who knew all it would take was hitting a big red plastic buzzer?!

It was a YP-hosted Sunday Night Region event, and the crowd was huddled around a small, wall-mounted TV, absolutely entranced as we played the ROW Game Show. As if a champion contestant on Jeopardy, I slammed that buzzer with all my might and confidently blurted out my answer... only to have the host, Miss Larger-Than-Life-Itself Nikkiy Bestgen, respond with a very enthusiastic and empathetic “Incorrect.” Laughter and brief mortification aside, I realized that it didn't matter that I'd answered most of the questions wrong or that I was the “Forum Newbie” — what mattered was the passion and genuine enthusiasm manifested by the YPs that night. Nikkiy, Brett Farner, Jake Farrell, Mindy Leadholm and Sarah Cook were all YPs that attended the event and contributed my “ah-ha,” I-want-to-be-a-part-of-this moment.

Fast-forward to a few years later, I find myself at an inevitable, identity-defining crossroad. A crossroad that Nikkiy, Brett, Jake, Mindy and Sarah must have found themselves at too, not long after that Sunday Night event — transitioning from an industry-branded “Young Professional” to the next phase of one's career. But what is that “next phase,” and what happens when you're no longer considered a Young Professional in your industry? I'm struggling with this fast-approaching transition and not quite sure how to feel about it.

For the past 11 years, I have been one of the youngest individuals in my profession. This distinction has always made me proud of where I came from and eager to prove where I'm capable of going. Unfortunately, by IRWA standards, I only qualify for the “Young Professional” title for another two years. This leaves me wondering... when I pass that threshold from 34 to 35, what distinction will I have that will set me apart, and what will I be considered then?

A fellow colleague and friend, IRWA International President Jacob Farrell, SR/WA, had an answer to my burning question. Put simply, Jake replied, “Well, we become Middle-Aged Professionals.” Jake went on to explain how he, too, had this same question a few years back, and as he thought on it, he concluded that naturally, the next chapter of one's career would be the “middle.” Therefore, we'd be considered a “Middle-Aged Professional” within our industry.

Similar to the term used in everyday life, “middle-aged” bridges the gap between the younger generation, which may include full-speed-ahead innovators, who may be a little less experienced, and the older generation, which encompasses professionals who have a wealth of knowledge but may prefer a more calculated and traditional approach to situations. An IRWA Middle-Aged Professional could be looked at as a generational negotiator — curbing the sometimes overly ambitious thoughts of the younger generation while still supporting their new and creative ideas. A Middle-Aged Professional can also be that encouraging voice for the older generation to keep an open mind while still respecting the legacies and standards that preceded.

There will always be some level of uncertainty and angst as we transition from one demographic to another. Whether you're a Young Professional facing scrutiny over age and lack of experience, an older professional dealing with technology-advancing trends or even an in-between like myself, what unites us is our passion for the right of way industry and the support we have for one another as an Association. 🌟



*Amanda P. Vande Voorde, RWP, serves as the current Young Professionals Committee vice chair and Chapter 41 president. She has over 10 years' experience acquiring land rights, spanning multiple states. Amanda was born and raised in Northern Michigan but now calls Cedar Rapids, Iowa, home. Her six-year-old son, Warren G, keeps her on her toes and shares in her obsession with Bigfoot.*