



# BOUNDLESS POTENTIAL

## An Interview with International President Fred Easton, Jr., PLS, SR/WA

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN

On the night of Wednesday, June 28, 2023, Fred Easton, Jr., PLS, SR/WA, addressed the audience in his hometown of Denver, Colorado, during the Closing Gala of the 69th Annual International Education Conference. Though he was typically one to keep his composure, carefully considering every thought before speaking, tonight was different. Tonight, he vulnerably opened his heart to his closest colleagues and friends and spoke of the personal mentors who had shaped him throughout his life: his father, a mapper from Orange County who taught him surveying; his mother, who raised him to be inquisitive in nature and showed him how to find the answer instead of simply giving it to him; his childhood friend, who taught him to value the fragility of life; his best friend, Richard Pittenridge, SR/WA, who encouraged him to join the Association and become a leader; and finally, his wife Heather, who was his compass, guiding him through the tidal waves of change that would lead him to this very night.

Exhilarated by the sea of possibilities that now lay ahead, Fred took in the sounds of the crowd before him, which had erupted in applause at the conclusion of his poignant speech. He knew, without a doubt, that he would never forget this moment — the day he first stepped into the role of International President of IRWA.

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

I worked on survey crews for my father at a young age. He'd bring his kids along to remote projects during the summer. I wanted to be with my dad and older siblings, so I tagged along with them and learned how to hold the rod. I was six and could barely hold the rod level, but I just wanted to be part of the action.

### How did you discover IRWA?

Richard Pittenridge, SR/WA, and I were working together on a long water transmission line, and he kept mentioning IRWA and asking me to come to meetings and classes. He finally talked me into coming to a meeting, and the rest is history!

### What was your initial impression of the Association?

Most of my experience with professional associations to this point was either with surveyors or engineers. It was the juxtaposition of ROW professionals versus those groups that jumped out to me. Here, I found an organization that could provide serious education and hard work while also having some of the most fun I'd ever had while networking with other professionals. Even at a young age, I was taught a work-hard, play-hard ethic, which fits IRWA well.

## What has been your proudest achievement to date?

Professional education has been key to my professional career. I'm proud of obtaining my Professional Land Surveying license, and of course, becoming an IRWA instructor and earning my SR/WA. In leadership, I'm most proud of leading the IDEAs and Strategic Planning Task Forces, both of which have generated lasting change. I was able to help gather and generate ideas that myself and others have seen to fruition. It's been rewarding to witness the impact as an officer. Though at times, things don't always end up as envisioned, that's how being part of a committee works. As a leader, you accept that an idea is group property, and you do your best to address problems as they arise.

But of course, perhaps my greatest achievement of all was marrying my wife Heather (who, let's be honest, is out of my league) and staying married for 28 years and counting.

## What is the best advice you've received and how has that informed your leadership style?

My wife gives me some of the best advice, but here's one I always keep in mind as it relates to IRWA leadership: "Keep a thick skin, shake off any drama, and remember what is important."

From the late Carol Brooks, SR/WA, I received almost prophetic advice, considering my leadership journey so far: "Keep a list of ideas and priorities. If it's a ridged plan, you will just get frustrated since this is leadership by committee and board, and you are going to have to roll with the punches and just revisit that list when it all changes."

And finally, my seventh-grade social studies teacher said, "Never let anyone hack your brain through identity bias" (i.e., you aren't your job, you perform tasks related to that job; you aren't a political party, you lean a political direction; you aren't any elected or appointed position, you are performing the position's tasks for a temporary period; never judge yourself or someone else on their race, gender, attractiveness, height, etc.).

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

Our higher purpose is to improve people's lives, and that fits perfectly with my leadership goals — the primary motivation that led me to leadership and keeps me going is the students I see in the classes I teach. These are often young professionals struggling with mentorship and knowledge gaps as they grow professionally. IRWA fills that critical gap, and it is so essential that we get it right and teach ethical acquisition of rights of way for public improvement projects to the widest audience possible.

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

Luckily, my priorities have changed a lot since I first declared my candidacy for International Secretary. Through my time on the IEC, so many of the education and marketing initiatives I campaigned on back in 2019 have been put in place due to the help of my fellow past and current IRWA leaders.



We must “keep our foot on the pedal” though, as a fan of studying history, I know in our IRWA history we have a terrible habit of solving problems, then forgetting those problems existed, dropping the initiatives that were quietly working while we fixed new problems, then having to cycle back around to refix the same problems in the next decade; education updates, improvements, marketing and showing employers the value of hiring an SR/WA will always be top of my priority list, but these items are in good hands with our committee leaders right now.

But what is left and what has really emerged since COVID is a need to address leadership: give our Chapter leaders the best tools to succeed; create sustainable leadership training for all levels of our governance; create leadership training for our members to ensure IRWA members, and especially SR/WA members, represent the top leaders in the right of way industry; and lastly, inspire and train our existing professionals to be effective mentors.

### **How do you believe young professionals will shape the industry's future?**

First, they have a better understanding of the human mind. Because discussing mental illness has been so taboo for my and older generations, it has been hard to include training, tracking and discussions in our workflows. I believe young professionals will be open to learning and better understanding of how our minds function, incorporate that understanding into their approaches, and as a result, our entire industry will be better able to adjust to the conditions of others.

Also, they will focus on impact beyond the basic project. Young professionals tend to have a greater awareness of environmental concerns, need for public involvement and buy-in, and sensitivity to diversity, inclusion and equality issues. This can lead to broadened perspectives and vision, better teaming with renewable energy partners, increased creativity in approach to projects and enhanced focus on ethics.

I had the benefit of great mentors who didn't tell me what to do — they listened to my ideas and helped me to evolve those to successful actions. I hope my generation will be there for the young professionals, listen to them, offer advice, let them make their choices and back them up no matter what happens next.

### **What do you want our members to know about you?**

I'd like the members to know that I'm always up for hearing ideas to improve member value, better outreach to the industry at large, keep our conference great, keep our education top-notch and grow our Association! I'm a mentor, but I'll always be a mentee as well. I believe we should spend our lives constantly seeking to improve, grow and be a better member of society. Lifelong learning is key to that.



### **What is the greatest benefit of membership?**

Having a support network. This is embodied in access to fellow members, Chapter meetings, training courses, knowledge resources like magazine articles, conference sessions, symposiums and other gatherings. As a lifelong learner, I find it to be an invaluable membership.

The key is to be an active member, take courses, attend meetings and get involved. The quality of your work will improve, and there is a butterfly effect on the communities we serve. It's this key point that “you get what you put into it” that leads right back to our purpose to improve people's lives.

Recently, I had the pleasure of a little time to kill in downtown Denver, which afforded me a moment of relaxing while I watched people moving up and down the 16th Street Mall, a publicly accessible pedestrian area. It was a chilly day, but I was nice and toasty under the natural gas power space heater sipping my coffee stout with beans harvested from over 9,000 miles away, and water fresh from the Rockies captured in a reservoir, tunnel and pipe system to avoid contaminations. To get home later, I'd be taking the light rail to get to my car. None of what I was doing or saw would be possible without the acquisition and management of right of way corridors and public lands. The impact of our work will be felt for generations to come, so let's work together to do it the right way! 🌱