



SPOTLIGHT ON ANDREA R. OLDEN, RWA

Describe your professional career. How did you first become interested in the right of way industry?

After college, I worked as a catering manager for a deli restaurant chain. I loved the pace and the customer service aspect of the work, but the hours were grueling and there were no benefits. A good friend of mine, Cindy, let me know there was an opening for an executive assistant position at American Acquisition Group in Tampa, Florida, and thought I would be a good fit. Like many people outside the industry, I had almost no knowledge of eminent domain or right of way. I thought it would be a positive change and a valuable experience, a step on my path to my professional future.

I was given an opportunity, and it truly changed my life. I started out doing anything that was needed from making coffee and running for lunch, to assembling mass mailings and building project status reports. As I learned the ropes, I worked my way to writing bid proposals for new work and making contacts and attending appointments





with property owners. I found a love for the work; every project and every parcel and every person you meet has a unique situation and story. We come through with a project and many of them really affect people's lives, from the displaced tenant living in a dilapidated mobile home in the deepest rural areas, to the million- and billion-dollar businesses along major highways in the city. Each of them has unique needs and concerns. Whether it's diving deep into the chain of title of a particular property or working alongside a displaced family to help them find a new home, I really enjoy all aspects of the job.

The best part is, after 15 years, I'm still learning new things in new areas every single day.

How did you hear about IRWA and how long have you been with the Association?

I was blessed to land in a great company that supports its staff in being the best and brightest in the industry (at least, in my humble opinion). My boss and mentor, D. Wade Brown, SR/WA, actively encourages and supports staff in participating in IRWA, taking classes and obtaining the licenses and certifications the team needs to build expertise.



Not too long after I started with the firm, I was able to attend an annual educational conference in St. Pete Beach as a non-member, and I remember really then seeing how far reaching the right of way industry is — our colleagues are involved with so many aspects of everyday life and keeping modern society running, starting with the many ways we move around the world right down to the water that runs from the faucets in our homes. I participated in several events, classes and conferences over time and became a member in 2014 shortly before I was promoted to right of way agent.

What are some leadership positions you've held within the Association?

So far, I've served the last six years as the chair of Chapter 26's Nominations and Elections Committee. It's my goal to take on new roles going forward in my local Chapter and beyond.

You have served as Chapter 26's Nominations & Elections Committee chair for many years. What draws you to this position?

To be honest, at the time, no one was jumping to volunteer for the role, and the Chapter president at the time asked if I would step into the leadership position. I was a little hesitant, having never served on a Board of any kind at the time, but I've really found it to be the perfect way to stay involved in my Chapter and the IRWA community at that stage of my life. I had a young family and was kicking off a new career, and this allowed me to put the work in for the Chapter for a couple of intense months each year without being a big-time commitment beyond the election cycle. I have been honored to have been reappointed by each incoming Chapter president, and it's been a great opportunity to learn the ropes of the Chapter Board and connect with other members along the way.

Do you have any tips for other Chapter Nominations & Elections Committee chairs for ensuring a smooth transition of officers every year?

Each year has taught me something new about the election process and potential challenges that may arise. I recommend creating some written guidelines if your Chapter doesn't have them yet, building on the guidelines handed down from International, so your Chapter has a point of reference for any given scenario.

In our most recent election, we dealt with a tie vote for the first time in my tenure, and maybe in the history of our Chapter, and there wasn't much written guidance on how to handle that situation. So that was a learning curve for our Chapter and a chance to improve the process moving forward and document



it for the successors in Chapter leadership. I also think it's important to work closely with the rest of the Board — it takes the whole team to do the work of member outreach, planning events and creating the education opportunities that drive membership and active participation and without that there's little interest in either running for office or participating in the elections. It's our job as Chapter Board and committee members to create the value in IRWA membership at the local level.

Can you share one of your favorite IRWA memories?

One of my favorite memories was definitely last year when I got the chance to attend my first full annual international education conference in Cleveland. I was blown away and inspired by all the amazing and talented people I got to meet, each with their own niche areas of expertise. Witnessing members receive their SR/WA designations as well as watching the awards ceremony really motivated me to step up my game. The highlight of that trip was getting to meet Kristen Bennett, SR/WA, and Dave Arnold, SR/WA, and watch a live show of the Infrastructure Junkies!



What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Cindy, who brought me into the right of way field, once told me I was always “writing the story before it happened” (i.e., convincing myself things would go wrong without giving myself the chance to make it go right). I think of that a lot, and it's a reminder to take each day and even each moment as a new opportunity to get things moving in the direction I want them to go. Just because things look dark doesn't mean you can't find a bright spot and a path forward, even if it's not the path you wanted or thought you needed. This has served me well both professionally and personally over the years.

One last question to end this interview on a fun note: if you could have lunch with anyone from history or fiction, who would it be and why?

My dad, hands down. He taught me to be tough, industrious and to take advantage of any chance thrown my way to learn something new, especially the things I didn't think I needed to know. To him, knowledge wasn't the key to success, knowledge was success. He passed away when I was 25 just starting my family and setting out in my field. I'd love the chance to talk to him and let him see the person I am today. 🍷

Member Spotlight is a wonderful place to introduce yourself or to celebrate a fellow member's contributions to the IRWA. For more information or to submit a member for consideration, please contact Vivian Nguyen at nguyen@irwaonline.org.