



AGAINST ALL ODDS

An Interview with IRWA International President

JAKE FARRELL, SR/WA

BY VIVIAN NGUYEN

There was thunderous applause as Jake Farrell, SR/WA, accepted his president's pin from his wife Andrea at the 2021 Annual International Education Conference. After he helped her off the stage, he returned to the podium alone, throat tight with emotion as he stared out in the crowd, which had fallen silent in anticipation.

He took a second to compose himself, remembering the key choices that had led him to this very moment. He remembered the lessons he'd learn from his father, a calm but passionate man who always led by example, and how he had mentored him to become a leader who would follow in his footsteps. He remembered the adrenaline he felt when he stood up for what he believed in three years ago, flanked by close colleagues who were also unyielding in their principles to hand the Association back to its members. He remembered the sacrifices his family had made for him and all the times he wished he could be in two places at once so he could continue his passion for his career and IRWA while still spending time with his two little girls.

These people were there for him tonight, expectant smiles on their faces, and he was overwhelmed with gratitude. He was so lucky to be standing here, doing exactly what he'd set out to do — to harness whatever strength and courage he had within him to leave the Association better than he'd found it years ago.

He shifted the box of tissues closer, which resulted in a ripple of light laughter throughout the crowd. With a genuine grin stretching across his face, he addressed the members for the first time as Jake Farrell, SR/WA, International President of IRWA.

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

My father, Paul Farrell, worked for the Union Pacific Railroad for 41 years in their real estate department. He was very active in IRWA and served as Chapter 78 president before I even knew what right of way was. After college, I found a passion for construction and started my own construction company. Eventually, my father introduced me to Jack Borgmeyer, who owned Midwest Right of Way Services, Inc. I am forever grateful to Jack for his mentorship and friendship. As I grew in experience, I joined Omaha Public Power District and developed their Right of Way, Real Estate and Stakeholder Engagement processes. Right of way became a passion of mine. This industry is like none other and forces you to get stronger in knowledge and capacity.

How did you discover IRWA?

During my first week at Midwest Right of Way Services, Inc., Jack took me to my first Chapter 78 meeting. I have been engaged with the Association ever since. One of my greatest memories in IRWA leadership was signing the Chapter 78 charter as past president and seeing my dad's signature as well. It was a proud moment for me.

What was your initial impression of the Association, and has that perception changed?

It seems like a lifetime ago. My initial impression was that the Association seemed very archaic and traditional. Members loved to gather, socialize and let loose about discussions that always turned to war stories with projects. I was drawn to it and found myself wanting to be the person telling those stories, too. Since then, I've realized that the Association is deeply rooted in its history and passion for the industry. Just walk up to any member and start a debate with them — soon, it will be a mob of members. While we may disagree deeply on topics, we love to have drinks together and tell those war stories. It's an amazing thing to be a part of.

Have you experienced a meaningful mentor relationship within the Association?

I have too many to mention them all, but a few notable mentors are my father, Jack Borgmeyer, Larry Hagan, Faith Roland, Carol Croft and all those who have served on the IEC and IGC with me. Thank you to Rakhshan Mazarei and Tim Drennan for their endless hours of hard work and discussions over the past several years. Lastly,

thanks to Brent Lundgren for the years of friendship, support and lifelong debates on how to navigate this career in the right of way industry. Success in any industry requires a network of champions, mentors, coaches and peers. I have made a conscious effort to engage with peers who think like me and those who do not. I believe in the constant reminder of diverse thinking to create a thoughtful approach when problem solving. Thank you to all who have debated and disagreed with me throughout the years — you have changed me, and I appreciate it.

Tell us why you became involved in IRWA leadership. What inspired your decision to join the IEC?

I wanted to help grow and influence the Association. It was a great opportunity to learn the industry beyond my geographic area. Joining the IEC allowed me to influence the direction of the Association; I felt IRWA needed more focus on being a volunteer-led Association. It was important to me to ensure that collaboration and difficult conversations were happening and all voices were being heard.

The pandemic has presented numerous challenges for many members. Have there been any unexpected lessons learned, and will this affect how you'll lead as you step into the role of president?

One of the biggest challenges was learning how to navigate through a constantly changing environment. We implemented more virtual components within the Association, which is something we will continue to explore moving forward. During the pandemic, I found that schedules didn't really matter as much — the IEC was able to meet more frequently via video or phone, resulting in more timely and efficient results. That being said, networking is a huge part of IRWA, and keeping that in-person aspect is also important to forge and maintain connections. We will continue to preserve what makes this Association special.



Due to COVID-19, IRWA has been implementing more virtual offerings to maintain the best possible education and member experience. Will there be a focus on continuing to offer virtual classes and events post-pandemic?

I believe virtual courses will be a staple to our Association going forward. If we can see one positive aspect from the pandemic, it's that we finally got our virtual courses off and running. We have already started to push education back to Chapters. Education is best when it's a grassroots campaign. Chapters are the backbone of this great Association and once states open up, Chapters are encouraged to schedule in-person courses. The pandemic has shown us that we can function in a virtual world. By broadening our education offerings, we can more effectively engage and educate members across the globe.

What are some of the immediate priorities you'd like to address as president?

I'd like to finalize the transition back to a member-led Association and continue enhancing member value. The destiny of the IRWA should be established by its members. Additionally, I plan to implement an ongoing strategic plan to grow IRWA. The Association of my father is not sustainable, and it's vital that we adapt to meet the needs of our members and everchanging industry. To that effect, we've reinstated the Marketing and Membership Committee to increase outreach beyond ourselves and a Real Estate Law Committee, which consists of individuals who make up a small part of our community but has a huge impact on the industry as a whole.

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

I was part of the leadership team that helped to improve the official purpose of IRWA, and when I first became familiar with it, the message felt big and broad. However, as I have navigated through this Association, I've found that it's very true. Our jobs have a huge impact, and without us, projects do not happen. I spent a lot of time thinking about how this influences me and what I want to be; I've found that it's about serving. We need to be responsibility-driven leaders for the Association and the industry we serve. We must fulfill our purpose as industry leaders and do our part to serve our communities with integrity. This will help grow the IRWA brand and influence the industry long term.

What is the best way to engage those outside of the right of way industry?

There are so many opportunities to grow the influence and elevate the Association. As Congress debates infrastructure bills, we can work to education and position the IRWA to be the go to for ethical right of way practices. There is no magic bullet to engage the public in the importance of the work we do to “Improve the Quality of Life Through Infrastructure Development.” Engagement in depth and implementing layers of approach is necessary. Our members must push and require credentialing, the Association must push its influence on the industry, and our leaders must create partnerships and alignments with other industries that serve our common goals and interest. Elevating the Association and its brand is a priority to me. Moving forward, we should be working with agencies to create an IRWA credentialing requirement to work on projects. Overall, it’s vital that we continue to use our experience to influence the industry on a local, regional and national levels.

How do you believe young professionals will shape the industry’s future?

I have been passionate about young professionals since joining IRWA. At that time, Generation X was struggling to find a voice in an aging Association. We battled and stood up against traditions and culture to be heard. We found ourselves to be at a critical bridge from “the way it used to be” to the “the way it can be.” We helped usher in the age of technology. Now, it’s our job to help develop and prepare the next generation of leaders while remembering and honoring the past. Young Professionals and other micro- and meso-level groups have the unique opportunity to shape a rapidly changing Association and industry. This year, I plan to work with the chair and vice chair of the Young Professionals Committee to look beyond the singular focus of age or years in the right of way field and work towards being the committee that engages all member resources needs on a meso level. Long term, the Young Professionals Committee should be transitioned



to a Member Resource Committee where the Association’s deep diversity can shine.

What advice would you give to a new member looking to make the most of their IRWA experience?

Get in and strap up — it’s one hell of a ride. I have never seen a more passionate group of people in my life. This Association has a lot to give you; however, to get anything, you have to be willing to give. The return is more valuable than anything you can imagine. As I reflect back on my career and time with IRWA, it’s hard to hold back my emotions. That’s how influential this Association can be.

What do you want our members to know about you, and what can they look forward to this year?

I promise to fundamentally change this Association and give it back to the members. We are and should always be a member-led Association. We will move together towards common goals this year, and I’m excited to get started. 🌟

