

# WILLIAM P. BAHNFLETH

ASHRAE President 2013-14



**Bill Bahnfleth:** I was born in Champaign, Illinois, where the University of Illinois is located. My father was a faculty member there at the time, and I lived much of my early years in Downers Grove, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. I went to high school in Cincinnati, Ohio, and then came back to Illinois and got four degrees at the University of Illinois: three in engineering and one in music.

I went back and worked with my father's firm for a few years in Cincinnati as a consulting engineer, and from there went to State College, Pennsylvania, where Penn State is located. I've been a professor of architectural engineering there since 1994, and it's still my position today.

I think, in part, of course, it was that my father was in the industry and really loved his work, so I grew up around someone who really believed in engineering as a career, was in the HVAC&R business, and felt that that was a great way to have a good career and to serve humanity. So, that was part of it. I think also, at the time I was thinking about careers, engineering was widely viewed as being a good field to get into. So, those were the sorts of things that influenced me, but I can't say I was, I was terribly strongly drawn to any one profession, and, honestly, if I had, uh, it just followed my natural inclinations. I might have been a concert musician or an English professor or something of that sort, because I really enjoyed the arts and humanities when I was a student and getting educated.

I was fortunate to go to the University of Illinois, where there were some really significant ASHRAE figures, Will Stecker, in particular. He was an old family friend, from the days that my father worked there, and he was the advisor of the student branch. So, when I was an undergraduate student, I joined the ASHRAE student branch in the late 1970s and was a student member. I became, uh, an associate member in 1981 while I was a graduate student. I actually started out at the grassroots, which many people probably don't know. I was first a program chair and then a governor for the East Central Illinois chapter, which does not exist anymore, but we had a very nice chapter at that time. So, I started there. Then, there was a bit of a gap in terms of actual volunteer involvement, but about 1985, I became a technical committee member.

My boss and one of my employers, the Construction Engineering Research Lab of the Corps of Engineers Laboratory that deals with facilities, was rolling off of the weather information committee, and TC 4.2 was my first society assignment. From there, I stayed in TC's for quite a while, and when I went to Penn State, Stan Mumma, who was a very active ASHRAE member and really was great at bringing ASHRAE into our curriculum, started inviting presidents. And in 1995 or '6, uh, Billy Manning came, and I had a chat with him while he was there and said that I would really be interested in getting involved in, uh, ASHRAE in other ways, and he gave me my first standing committee appointment, which was to, uh,

what at the time was called Special Publications, so that was the foot in the door to ASHRAE management and leadership, and, uh, from there it had just evolved.

I chaired TC 6.9, Thermal Energy Storage, and I worked through a number of different standing committees, mostly in publishing and Education Council, and Tech Council eventually became Chair of Tech, and, I moved up to the Board in, I think it was, 2006, and did a full tour on the Board, and went directly from there to Vice President, and from there to Treasurer, and on up to, to President. So, more or less a continuous, 20–25-year continuum from, entry-level volunteer work to society leadership.

I think in some ways there are the issues that ASHRAE always faces: how do we best serve our members in today's environment, and how do we best contribute to the industry and to the good of humanity outside? But to be specific, I think one of the issues was clearly that ASHRAE's growth in recent times had been mainly outside of the U.S. and Canada. So, a global growth of ASHRAE and how we managed that, how we structured that, was an important issue. I also felt that ASHRAE's position in indoor environmental quality was something that needed work, that we had become very focused on energy and on environmental issues like climate change. So, those were two of the main things that I felt we needed to respond to when I was president.

My theme was shaping the next: our world, ourselves, and our work. And the idea of it was that we needed to have both goals and a plan to get there so that we could do things day by day in the society that would ultimately lead to a real significant change the kind of transformation of the industry that ASHRAE has always had as its mission. So, I broke things down consistent with my previous comments, into those three areas of our world, ourselves, and our work. To represent how we engaged with the outside, with other organizations, with the industry, with people what we did to provide benefits to our members and to make their experience at ASHRAE better, and what ASHRAE was doing about how we actually went about the things that that we do. So, there were many subtasks and goals under those three categories, but that's the big picture of it.

I suppose to be different without trying to be different is an important thing to be myself and to do the things that I thought were important to do and to be credible as someone who had come to the position on my own merits. I certainly didn't, I, well, I enjoyed being a legacy president so to speak. I wanted to be sure that it was clear that I was the president because ASHRAE had chosen me to be president, not because my father had been one, but he was a great one. And I learned a lot from him. And I think that that experience was very valuable to me as I was growing up. I had a perspective on leadership of ASHRAE, I think, that few can have because I had had so many conversations with him over a period of 20 or 30 years and seen what he did when he was president. So, it was challenging, but it was also a nice thing as well to be that second-generation president.

Well, I would certainly like to cite a lot of things, but if I had to pick one, probably the one that will have the most impact is a new strategic plan. We decided, actually, during, Tom Watson's presidency at our fall board meeting where we had strategic discussions that we were really at the point where we needed to come up with a new plan. So, it's sort of a sneaky answer to put many things into one thing. The strategic plan addressed many of the priorities that I think the society should have, and it was a really well-done strategic plan that I think is going to benefit the society for a long time in terms of providing structure to how we move forward.

We had some very interesting experiences while traveling. Travel, of course, is prone to various mishaps, one of them being luggage not arriving. So, on two occasions, I spoke at fairly, high-level international gatherings wearing borrowed clothes. So, if you go to my Facebook page and see a photo of me wearing, a pair of, casual shoes and cargo pants, and, a jacket that looks a little bit too long and a funny tie, that's because, those were the times that I had to borrow them to do things like charter a chapter or give a keynote address at a conference.

And one other time I slept on a floor in the lounge of Turkish Airways in Istanbul because our flight was delayed. So, those sorts of, uh, things I look back on now as being some of the humorous moments of the presidency.

Honestly, um, when it was all over, uh, I looked back and had, uh, no regrets at all about what I did or what ASHRAE did during that period. I think it was a tremendously successful year, and I'm not going to second-guess myself now and say that we really could have done anything better. There's not a single thing that I want to take back. It was a wonderful year from that point of view.

It really has been a short time and it's hard to see much change in the world in the time that has passed since then. I think the main thing that's happening is an accelerating trend of, of global growth and influence and the continuing need for ASHRAE to be more global in its outlook because, the important things that are happening, the growth of the built environment and the development of technology are happening, outside the U.S. and Canada to a significant extent, and we need to continue to respond to that if ASHRAE is going to remain relevant.

I've spent an amount of my working time that would be hard to calculate on ASHRAE because I really, uh, have loved the kinds of things you can do as a member of this organization. It has turned, I tell people, it turns a job into a calling. As professional, it can certainly be very satisfying to design buildings or systems in buildings or to do whatever you might do in your job. But the time you spend with ASHRAE, you are directly helping to improve the conditions for the 54,000 members of the organization and, beyond that, the quality of life of everyone who lives in a building that has an air-conditioned environment.

So, it's given a lot of meaning to my work, and it's allowed me to have a global career instead of a local one. I've traveled all over the world on behalf of ASHRAE and been able to become engaged with those global issues and to try to do something positive about them.

Among my academic degrees, the four that I mentioned earlier, one of them is in music. I started playing keyboards when I was young and in grade school. I really enjoyed that, and I particularly liked the organ, which I heard played by some very good musicians in church when I was young. And so that has remained a hobby of mine to this day as well as a field that I studied formally. It's also how I met my wife, so I like to play piano and organ. My other hobbies are mainly active hobbies. I like to run. I was a track and cross-country athlete when I was younger. Now I do a lot of bicycling, and I do hiking, which is something I can do with my wife, so I try to keep myself fit as a hobby also.

Be willing to volunteer would be one of them. That, certainly a young person wants to establish their career, but the earlier you start to give back and to participate in organizations like ASHRAE, the sooner you start to reap the benefits and the farther you go in the organization. So, start early as a volunteer in ASHRAE as I did. Don't expect to have everything tomorrow. It takes time to develop the trust and respect of your peers, and responsibility will come, and honors will come. Stay engaged. It takes



commitment over a long time to be an effective volunteer. I think we have many young members today who are doing just that, and that's one of the things I'm really pleased about with ASHRAE currently: how young members are being brought into leadership and contributing to what we do.