

# THOMAS PHOENIX

ASHRAE President 2014-15



**Tom Phoenix:** I was born and raised in North Carolina, actually was born in Pinehurst, the Gulf capital of the world. That's only because that was the closest hospital to this little town where I lived. I graduated high school in Gastonia, North Carolina, went to college at NC State University, and graduated there and went right to work. My father was an educator. He was a high school principal and a school superintendent. And he knew everybody in the Division of Education, the Department of Education in Raleigh. And through his connections, I heard about an engineering position with the facilities group in the State Board of Education, and I applied, and I got the job, and that was my first job as an engineer.

A lot of what I did in my first job was HVAC related, and I began to learn the systems, and I began to design renovations in public schools. And then I was involved in a statewide energy audit, and that's how I got interested in building systems, and particularly HVAC. And I went, I left there and went to work for an architecture engineering firm where I was doing only design, and that's when I got involved in ASHRAE.

I joined ASHRAE in 1982. And got really involved, at the first, the chapter level, and then the regional level, and then the society level. It's been a big part of what I do in my life, you know, ever since. One of the manufacturer's representatives, he said, "Are you a member of ASHRAE?" And I knew what ASHRAE was 'cause I had seen the books and the magazines, but that's all I knew about it. And I said, "No, I'm not a member of ASHRAE." And he said, "Well, you have to join ASHRAE. You're not gonna ever do anything in this business until you join ASHRAE." So, I did.

Well, the industry grows as ASHRAE grows and vice versa. And, you know, it's a big part of the industry. The nice thing about ASHRAE, to me, as a consulting engineer and as a young engineer when I first started, were a lot of the resources that you could call on to help you. ASHRAE, it-it's the standard of the industry, basically. And it has been, and it always will be it's because of the membership. We're not a trade organization. We don't have manufacturers as members. We're not focused on one aspect of the business. We are a wonderful resource and a wonderful organization for all aspects of the building systems industry. So, I think the growth of the industry and the growth of ASHRAE has certainly happened hand in hand.

I was invited to attend and make a couple presentations to the World Expo in Milan, Italy, during my year. So, I was planning on going to Italy and doing that. The people at ICAR called me a few like a month or six weeks beforehand and said, "Hey, can you change your plans a little bit

and come to Rome a few days early? We have kind of a special event lined up.” And I said, “Sure, what’s going on?” And they said, “Well, we have we’ve lined up a basically a behind-the-scenes tour of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican.” And I said, “Oh, yeah, I’ll be there for that.” I changed my airlines, and we got everything ready.

And a couple weeks before the trip, I get another phone call from our friends at ICAR, and they said, “We don’t have a copy of your speech. We need a copy of your speech ahead of time.” And I went, “What speech?” And they said, “Well, you’re the presenter at this special event at the Vatican.” And I, you know, that’s the first time they ever told me that. Obviously, it took me by surprise.

Luckily, we have a wonderful staff here at ASHRAE. They jumped right on it and got a speech written for me. And what it turned out to be was the, they had installed a brand-new HVAC system in the Sistine Chapel because the current system was not working, and they were concerned about losing the paintings and the frescoes and some of the artwork was deteriorating, and they put in a special, specially designed and specially constructed HVAC system to maintain the art. This was the dedication ceremony for that new system, and the cover article in the journal that month coincidentally came out that same day I was there, and it was about this new system at the Vatican, at the Sistine Chapel. So, I actually had some folks ask me to sign their copy, so it sort of felt like a celebrity, but that really was kind of a highlight of my year. It was fun.

I do a couple things. I, you know, I try to play golf, but I’m not much good at it. I do like fly fishing. I’ve been fly fishing since I was a teenager. People say, “What’s your hobby?” I’ll just say, “ASHRAE.” You know, I mean, that’s what I do when I’m not working: ASHRAE stuff. I really was raised with the philosophy that you’re supposed to give back to the industry and/or give back to whoever helped you. And being in the HVAC world, you know, ASHRAE became a big part of what I did. ASHRAE became my resource and my connection, and most of my best friends, all came from my people I met at ASHRAE. And so, I stayed with it just to give back. You can’t survive in this industry without becoming a member of ASHRAE. And we do that with all of our young engineers at my office. We ask them to join ASHRAE if they weren’t a member already, and we ask them to be involved. You’re only gonna get out of any organization what you put in it. We really would like you to get involved and make the connections and find the resources that you need to advance your career.