

## Who's Going To Fill Their Shoes?

By Mike Stanzel, Deputy Circuit Rider

No, I'm not referring to an old George Jones song. What I'm writing on is (if I can say this without offending anyone) water/wastewater operators are not getting any younger. After attending our last several conferences and expo, I'm going to make a guess that the average age of our attendees at these training sessions is approximately 50 plus years old. I do know for a fact that there are numerous active operators that are in their seventies and a few in their eighties.

While this is great that these people are still working, I know that some, if not all, are thinking about retirement. But with this there is concern about who is going to take over for them when they're gone. Sadly I have met several guys who tell me that there is no one else wanting to be the operator so they feel obligated to the community that they have lived in all their life to continue taking care of the water system.

With the economy the way it is, the younger generation is not residing in small town USA probably due to the fact that most kids are going to college. With what most operators are getting paid, they can't afford to raise a family on small town wages much like people did in years past.

Up until about twelve years ago, I didn't know what a water/wastewater operator was, let alone know what their responsibilities were. It took a long time to obtain the knowledge, training and licenses that I have obtained over the years and I am still learning every day.

So here are the big questions that the City Council and Town Boards need to ask themselves. Who are we going to get to replace John Doe who's been with the Village for 30 years? How are we going to get Jim Doe trained and certified? And the biggest question is how are we going to pay for this training? That is, if John Doe is still around to train the new person. What if John suddenly retires? Gets sick? Or simply just quits? These town boards need to know how valuable and how much information and knowledge you guys and gals have obtained over the years about various aspects of your City or Village. I will guarantee that each and every water operator out there knows something about their water system that no one else knows, whether it is knowing how to shut off a particular section of water main that isn't on the map or being able to find the shut off valve for the old theater that is located two blocks down and one block over.

Regardless of how long you have been there you have an invaluable amount of knowledge that only comes with experience. So please show this article to your Board and Council members so they can get a plan of action ready, in case you are planning to retire.

One town that I will not name in this article has done just what I have been writing about. Mr. Operator went to the council meeting and told them I am 64 years young and I am giving you my one year notice. The Council then took immediate action and budgeted to hire a replacement to work alongside Mr. Operator and learn the system and go to classes to get certified in water and wastewater.

Please share this information with your Board and Council and please call NeRWA if you or anyone else has any questions.