

THE *Unspoken* Benefits of Membership

By Peter Pineda

Well obviously they wouldn't be unspoken if I could just list them for you. So instead, I will need to provide you with my own personal experience and career in the water environment industry and allow you to draw your own conclusions.

I began my career with the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) in 2001, fresh out of college, in their Industrial Waste and Pretreatment Unit with absolutely no idea what I would be doing. Honestly, my degree in chemical engineering prepared me to work at a chemical plant or an oil refinery, but not to regulate them. Well, it wasn't long before I realized that I was going to need some outside training to equip me with the skills to better perform my duties. Through the advice of some coworkers, I located a relatively local industrial waste conference organized by the Eastern Pennsylvania Water Pollution Control Operators Association (EPWPCOA). This conference would soon become one of my most anticipated events of the year, not only for quality training applicable to my specific field, but for networking with other like-minded professionals and also for fun and enjoyment. The speakers at the conference were all well versed, many of them being EPA employees working in the pretreatment unit and others being

pretreatment coordinators themselves. The conference was one-and-a-half days and included exhibitors and a networking event. It would become a training event that I attended every year and eventually became involved in; first as a speaker and then as a committee member planning the conference and other training events related to pretreatment.

Through my interaction with EPWPCOA, I was introduced to a whole new world of wastewater operations, not just pretreatment. I was also introduced to EPWPCOA's affiliate, the Pennsylvania Water Environment Association (PWEA), which also conducted trainings and held an annual technical conference and exhibition entitled PennTec. I attended my first PennTec in 2006 at State College, Pennsylvania and was literally amazed by what I experienced. First the training classes were like none I have ever taken. There was a diverse schedule covering topics of particular interest to me like pretreatment, but also many others areas like collection systems and engineering. Upon my review of the schedule, I realized there were topics in other areas that also pertained to my work for the Philadelphia Water Department. I went from class to class and when I had time I would explore the exhibit hall. The exhibit hall – wow, I was taken aback by all of the many

exhibitors, and the hustle and bustle of the people flowing through. It wasn't long until I found myself chatting with various exhibitors about their products and services relative to my work. I was learning more and more about pretreatment, and even more about wastewater operations. I was realizing that the water environment industry was a big industry that is supported by various private companies. It would be here in the exhibit hall, where I would witness something that had me yearning to become more involved with PWEA: the Operations Challenge, a live competition between the DELCORA Loo-Natics and the Western Pennsylvania Wastewater Pollution Control Association (WPWPCA) Die-Jesters. For those of you who have not been to PennTec or WEFTEC, the Operations Challenge is the "Wastewater Olympics" for professionals in the wastewater treatment industry. Teams of four members compete in five separate timed events: collection systems, laboratory, process control, maintenance, and safety. At WEFTEC, each team is sponsored by a WEF member association, like PWEA, or a recognized operator association. Winners are determined by a weighted point system, each designed to test the diverse skills required for the operation and maintenance of wastewater treatment facilities, their collection systems, and laboratories.



PennTec 2007, Operations Challenge Competition – Philly River Rats.





WEFTEC 2007, Operations Challenge Competition – PWEA’s Die-Jesters.

“There are many other benefits to being a member of associations such as EPWPCOA, PWEA, and WEF. These organizations not only provide top-notch training, but also plan social events for fun and networking.”

After returning to work from PennTec 2006, I immediately began researching the Operations Challenge, and started asking my superiors, “Why doesn’t Philadelphia have an Ops Challenge team?” My curiosity took me nearly to the top of the organization, asking the current commissioner, Debra McCarty (deputy commissioner at the time) the same question. I cannot recall her exact words, but do remember the gist of it, which was if you have the enthusiasm to see it through I will support you. Well, I surely had the enthusiasm and I would quickly learn I also had my employer’s support, a necessary item to attend conferences and be part of something like the Operations Challenge. I returned to PennTec in 2007, this time with my very own team, the Philly River Rats.

The Philly River Rats brought a new level of competition to PennTec 2007 by providing a third team to what historically has been a battle of two teams essentially representing the east and west of the state. For our first-ever competition, we did an exceptional job and placed third with the Die-Jesters taking second and the Loo-Natics taking first. During the competition results announcement, PWEA surprised all attendees by noting that they would be sending two Operations Challenge teams to WEFTEC, where they would both represent Pennsylvania in the national competition.

While the Philly River Rats never made it to San Diego that year, I was fortunate enough to have my employer’s support to attend WEFTEC 2007. What an experience! I felt like

a kid on his first day at high school. It had everything PennTec had but bigger, much bigger – an exhibit hall so huge it would take days to canvas, so many presentations you need a schedule to keep track of it all, and the Operations Challenge with over 50 teams competing.

Each morning, I would ride one of WEF’s buses from my hotel to the convention center and quickly made friends with the DELCORA Loo-Natics, a relationship which would prove to be invaluable to the Philly River Rats and me. It was an incredible networking opportunity, which I took full advantage of. I was glad to be a part of it all, even the Operations Challenge for which I was just an enthusiastic spectator cheering on Pennsylvania’s two teams. The Loo-Natics placed 10th

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WEFTEC 2007, Operations Challenge Competition – PWEA’s Die-Jesters.



WEFTEC 2013, Operations Challenge Competition – PWEA's Philly River Rats.



A night at the Reading Royals Hockey Game 2/19/16.



EPWPCOA Young Professionals – Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs Game 7/31/14.

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(out of 30 teams in Division 2) and the Die-Jesters placed 18th with a notable third place in the Laboratory Event.

When I returned to work from WEFTEC 2007, I was more prepared to fulfill my recent promotion to assistant manager of PWD's Industrial Waste Unit. My skills as a manager were improving and I was continuing to stay up to date on pretreatment regulations and issues through EPWPCOA's annual industrial pretreatment conferences. PWEA and EPWPCOA (as well as CPWQA & WPWPCA) do a great job of selecting topics and pairing speakers to provide dynamic training events to its

members and non-members alike. This is possible because the committees that plan these training events are made up of individuals like you and I, who have vested interest in the training.

I was also prepared to improve the Philly River Rats performance, which would not have been possible without the help of the Loo-Natics. The team and coaches at DELCORA made their training equipment available to us and also showed us how to run the events, something we were still learning. It would lay the groundwork for the Philly River Rats to return to PennTec in 2008 and again in 2013. We received the

full support of PWEA when we gained their sponsorship to WEFTEC 2013 in Chicago. The association supported our efforts by providing training equipment and paying for all travel expenses and registration fees for the five of us to attend and compete. It was truly an honor wearing our team t-shirts with the PWEA logo while we competed.

Are you thinking of starting your own Operations Challenge team? Well, you must be a Water Environment Federation member to do so. There are many other benefits to being a member of associations such as EPWPCOA, PWEA, and WEF. These organizations not only provide top-notch training, but also plan social events for fun and networking. For instance, the Young Professionals Committee of EPWPCOA plans multiple social events each year which include brewery tours, hockey games, and baseball games. The association also plans an annual golf tournament, a trade show, and their Mid-Summer Expo. They also host their regular meetings at wastewater treatment plants, which can include locations such as the Yuengling Brewery in Pottstown, PA. I attended the Iron Pigs baseball game in Allentown, PA, where I would find a new employment opportunity.

I always thought I would finish my career where I began, probably still working in the same field of industrial pretreatment. It could seem shortsighted, but honestly, I was in my comfort zone. I was working close to home in a field that I was now an expert in. I really had no reason to think about doing anything else, and when I would think about switching jobs I was sure I would need to relocate to another major city with a large pretreatment program that would justify employing someone for that sole purpose. What I didn't realize at the time was that I was pigeon-holing myself by thinking that pretreatment was my only skill set.

My epiphany came in late 2014 when I took and passed the DEP General and Activated Sludge Wastewater System Operator's Exams. I know it seems odd, not being a certified operator and coaching an Operations Challenge Team or being a member of EPWPCOA, an Operator's Association, but it is the truth. I did not become a certified wastewater system operator until February 2015. After I passed my exams I began to look into possible employment situations. There was no better place to start than the job boards on pwea.org and epwpcoa.org. I found numerous job opportunities, especially for wastewater treatment plant operators. However, I could not find

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any current openings (in Pennsylvania) related to pretreatment. I started to look at all of the available jobs in the water environment field in Pennsylvania and came across two opportunities for an authority manager, both of which were posted on PWEA and EPWPCOA websites. Upon reading both advertisements, I realized I met the minimum qualifications but did not possess the years of experience. Not thinking much of it, I decided to apply for both jobs. To my surprise, I was contacted by both townships for an interview.

One of those townships was South Whitehall Township, where I am now currently employed as the authority manager. I took over this upper management post in March of 2015 at the age of 36. It was a giant change for me; not only did I relocate to Allentown from Philadelphia, but my professional responsibilities were dramatically increased. I will admit, at first I felt completely overwhelmed and had a hard time conceptualizing how I could fulfill so many roles as it really felt like I needed to be the jack-of-all-trades, and master of none, in the water and sewer industry. However, I would soon realize that the connections I made through EPWPCOA and PWEA

would support me in my new position. In some cases it would be advice from other engineers and managers in the field, and in other instances by support from vendors, many of which are not just salesmen, but pioneers in their field. In my opinion, I wouldn't be where I am today without being an active member of these organizations. ♦

Peter Pineda is the Authority Manager for South Whitehall Township. He was previously employed by the Philadelphia Water Department for 14 years, holding various positions in their Industrial Waste Unit.

ARE YOU READY FOR THE CHALLENGE?

PWEA is looking for an Operations Challenge Team to send to WEFTEC in 2017 in Chicago.

PWEA will pay expenses for up to four competitors and a coach to attend and compete at WEFTEC.

The qualifying team must compete with other teams at PWEA's Annual Conference (PennTec) on June 5 and 6 at the Kalahari Conference Center in Pocono Manor, PA.

Teams compete in five events: Process Control, Laboratory, Safety, Maintenance, and Collection

PWEA will offer support and provide equipment for the team(s) to use for practice!

For more information please contact Carrie Keeley at carrie.keeley@phila.gov or 215-768-2767 or

Sue Boynton at sboynton@pwea.org or 717-642-9500



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