



# Learning Something New Every Day

Cheryl Norton's Lasting Journey with WRF and the Water Sector

By Angelina Dinsmore, The Water Research Foundation

From leading a Water Research Foundation (WRF)-funded project right out of college, to becoming an integral member of the Board of Directors, Cheryl Norton has grown alongside WRF as she grew in her role at American Water. With both technical and managerial expertise, Norton is an indispensable asset to the evolution of WRF in its ongoing mission to advance the science of water.

"I really enjoy the experience and perspectives Cheryl brings to WRF," said John Albert, Chief Research Officer at WRF. "Her guidance always ensures our research pushes the water sector forward."

During her undergraduate studies at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville, Norton didn't see herself getting into the water or utility industry, but she knew she wanted to do research. Eager to level up from her part-time shifts at Taco Bell, she applied to do microbiology research with American Water after her junior year of college. What started as a temporary summertime job soon became a lasting career path. Now, 37 years later, Norton serves as the Chief Operations Officer and Executive Vice President of American Water.

"I found that I really enjoyed the water industry," Norton recalled. "I felt like there was a real mission. The research I was doing was exciting and was something that I could really build on."

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Norton's involvement with WRF had an early genesis. Her main focus was microbiology research on disinfection, looking primarily at chlorine and chloramines. For the first 13 years of her career, she

evolved from a team member to a leader of many research projects, including WRF project 270, *Occurrence and Control of Mycobacterium avium Complex*, where she served as principal investigator. She also co-authored WRF project 361, *Case Studies of the Impacts of Treatment Changes on Biostability in Full Scale Distribution Systems*.

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Although Norton enjoyed conducting research for many years, she soon found that she had a knack for problem solving in the managerial roles at American Water. She became the laboratory director in charge of compliance testing for chemical compliance across 14 states. After about seven years, Norton became the vice president of operations for Illinois American Water and learned about how water is treated, distributed, and everything in between. Eventually, Norton advanced to President at the Kentucky branch, then moved to a bigger branch in Missouri, and now has been at American Water headquarters in Camden, New Jersey for over two years.

Although Norton moved away from conducting research herself, she still maintained a lasting relationship with WRF. She served as a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) member monitoring and advising various WRF projects including project 2609, *Innovative Biofilm Prevention Strategies* and project 2565, *Rapid Screening of Pathogens in Water*. Norton has also chaired the Tailored Collaboration Review Committee for a few years, where she monitored and approved project proposals from utility subscribers. Now as a member of the WRF Board and Research Advisory Council, she’s had the opportunity to see WRF from every angle.

“That’s been the most exciting thing about working in the water industry—the people I’ve worked with have been so passionate about what they do,” Norton said. “I learn something new every day.”

A long-time WRF subscriber, Norton expressed how American Water’s subscription has helped them focus on the most current topics in the water sector. They not only are a part of many research initiatives but



Norton working in the lab circa 1990.

also glean information on current utility interests and research projects. As a former researcher, Norton knows firsthand how much work goes into every research project. She noted the high quality of WRF’s ongoing research and praised the expertise and collaboration of the staff members who oversee every step of the research’s publication.

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“It’s really important to us, as a subscriber, that we don’t have to wait two or three years to get the information on a topic that’s hot right now,” Norton said. “That’s why the subscribers keep coming back. The cost of everything is going up, but since the value remains, we can continue to invest, engage, and collaborate. It makes it a win-win.”



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When asked what she looks forward to most as a WRF Board member, Norton said first and foremost, the people. She loves the opportunity to have candid conversations with WRF staff and Board members about the current challenges and opportunities across the water sector.

Though she may have not initially realized it, water was always something she thought about. Growing up in the rural town of Polo, Missouri, Norton came to know water scarcity issues at a young age. Her family didn't have easy access to clean drinking water and despite their effort to try water wells and springs, the quality was too poor. Having to haul clean water from the next town over made them hyper-conscious of conserving water and water quality.

"I didn't realize it when I was ten years old, but water has been a really important thing to me forever," Norton

recalled. "It helped me to better understand how important this job is, and what a real mission it is to work for a water utility. That's why I've never left."

Norton never thought she would work for a water utility her entire career, but the mission prevailed. Her impact on the water sector is unmatched and she recalls knowledge from every single role she's played at American Water. As a researcher, subscriber, and advisor, Norton has been an essential member of the WRF community.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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