



# It's More Than Just the Research

Gary Burlingame Reminisces on Learning and Growing Alongside WRF

By Angelina Dinsmore, The Water Research Foundation

When Gary Burlingame started his undergraduate studies at Drexel University in 1976, he was undecided on what to study but knew he wanted to make a difference in the world. At the beginning of his Co-Op program (six months schooling and six months working), Gary started working in the quality control laboratory of a Philadelphia brewery, and then ultimately found his home in the laboratory of the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD). While it was never his long-term plan, the research remained stimulating and rewarding, so he just never stopped. While Gary could have become a Brew Master in a quaint mountain town, The Water Research Foundation (WRF) is eternally grateful he chose research.

Gary's interest in environmental science was prominent from the beginning. Based on his choice of research topics and interest in environmental issues, his professor knew he would be the perfect fit for a new environmental science curriculum. In fact, Gary joined the first class of environmental science majors at Drexel University in the late 1970s. He started volunteering

his spare time in the laboratory with graduate students—his first introduction to research.

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Initially, Gary didn't think too much about water research aside from his obvious interest in the element: “Water is a pretty good thing—I like fishing, I like canoeing, I like swimming—I like environmental things, and water is essential to the environment.”

Around 1985, Gary was first introduced to WRF while working in the lab at PWD. Drexel University received a grant to investigate the taste and odor (T&O) of drinking water. Gary was assigned to work on WRF project 55, *Taste and Odor in Drinking Water Supplies*, thinking it was a temporary task. He thought, “I’ll do this research, then get back to the things that really matter.”

Fast forward to now, T&O is still a prominent focus in Gary’s work and across the water sector. He accredits a lot of his expertise on the topic to all the T&O research opportunities he’s had with WRF.

“I got to know researchers who were working with WRF and decided this is a group I wanted to work with because I love to do research.”

Gary wouldn’t describe himself as the intellectual, academic type but rather as a problem-solver. He found it incredibly rewarding to see the entire research process: identifying the problem, designing a study, finding solutions, and exploring their applications to see if they made a difference.

Gary then sought other ways to stay involved, which led him to serve on WRF Project Advisory Committees (PACs). PACs are assigned to every research project, monitoring and advising research teams at every step of the way. When reflecting on his favorite times with WRF, Gary praised the 1990s. He benefitted from hearing other perspectives and expanding his knowledge of water systems. To Gary, there was nothing better than being in a community with other water professionals, hearing their stories, and understanding the diverse challenges they face.

“It was a real growth experience for me—taking me out of my laboratory in Philadelphia, taking me out of the city of Philadelphia, and letting me hear and see what’s happening all around the world.”

In 1996, Gary got involved with WRF’s Research Advisory Committee (RAC), a Board-appointed group that prioritizes and approves projects for funding. Those six years were what he found the most interesting about his involvement with the Foundation. He recalled flying out to Denver and spending long days

discussing research topics, debating about priorities, writing project descriptions, and ultimately planning the annual research agenda.

“Everybody would share their plans in the final meeting,” Gary recalled. “I’d hear about infrastructure, energy, finance, water quality, and more. My eyes were opened



Burlingame at a 1994 U.S.-Japan water quality conference.

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to the full gamut of what really goes on regarding the challenges in the water industry and water science. It was exhilarating.”

That led to chairing the RAC, which Gary never thought he would do. He thought the role would be reserved for deputy commissioners or senior managers of experienced companies rather than someone like him. “Here I am, a laboratory-grown scientist, and I’m chairing a very important committee” he said. “That was pretty humbling, but very, very encouraging.”

“Gary brought everything to the table when he participated on the RAC,” recalled John Albert, Chief Research Officer at WRF. “He was a voracious listener, and when he spoke, his kind, baritone voice (with a Philly accent) could be heard bringing different opinions together toward a solution. For many WRF staff, Gary was a mentor, always pushing us to broaden our perspectives.”

Gary was appointed to WRF’s Board of Directors in 2010, which—again—was something he never thought he would do. As a researcher, Gary’s role on the Board encouraged discussions focused on research and problem solving in the water industry rather than just human resource and finance issues. While at first it might have been daunting to sit at the same table as CEOs and deputy commissioners, Gary came to realize they weren’t much different. They all had the same mission to advance the science of water.

**It’s not just about the research project and research dollars. WRF provides a benefit to the water industry and their subscribers by mentoring and opening doors for employees of water utilities and subscribers to meet people and make connections, to see the bigger world and to learn about other aspects of the water industry. And that’s what happened to me.”**

After volunteering for almost 40 years with WRF, Gary believes WRF has been invaluable to both his professional and personal development. During Gary’s time with WRF, he advanced from a project scientist, to supervisor, to manager, and to the director of PWD’s Bureau of Laboratory Services. The experience with WRF fostered growth in his own leadership within PWD—leading committees with people from around the world, not just in his own laboratory. Having an oversight of millions of dollars of research money was a responsibility he wouldn’t get in his day-to-day job, so making



**During Burlingame’s time at WRF, he advanced from a project scientist to director of Philadelphia Water Department’s Bureau of Laboratory Services.**

connections and getting the bigger picture helped him grow his own management leadership skills. Gary honed such skills as contribution, collaboration, facilitation, and deliberation. “It’s not just about the research project and research dollars. WRF provides a benefit to the water industry and their subscribers by mentoring and opening doors for employees of water utilities and subscribers to meet people and make connections, to see the bigger world and to learn about other aspects of the water industry. And that’s what happened to me.”

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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