

AWWA Water Champion – Sandy Smith, Cleveland, Georgia

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Sandy Smith, national manager of sales, service, testing and business development for Burnett, Inc., was recognized at ACE24 for his "Outstanding Service to AWWA." He has been an influential volunteer with AWWA and the Georgia Section, including as GAWWA Section Chair and member of the AWWA Board of Directors, the Water Utility Council, and current president of the Water Buffalos.

How and why did you get into the water sector? My father, Cleveland R. Smith, served 38 years as plant superintendent for the City of Buford, Georgia. That was back in the 1970s when the



superintendent lived on site at the treatment plant. I often went with him to check operations, flush hydrants, clean out basins, etc. He got rather upset with me one day when he found out his operators were paying me to cut their share of the grass at the plant! I wouldn't trade that early utility education for anything. I remember sitting at his desk, seeing AWWA publications, and wondering if there really was a magazine about what my father did for a living. I was eventually hired as an operator and have been blessed since those early days to be part of an industry committed to protecting public health through clean, safe water. I became a second-generation superintendent and have two sisters who became licensed water plant operators – it became the family business!

After Buford, I went on to serve for 24 years with Gwinnett County and another eight years with DeKalb County before accepting my current role with Burnett. Now, more than ever, I travel to groundwater, surface water and wastewater treatment facilities across the country to assist with optimization, corrosion control, alkalinity and other issues. *(Pictured above, Sandy Smith at a treatment lab, appearing as Santa, and with his wife and three children.)*

What led to your focus on operations and water security? Plant operations and being part of a team have always been passions for me. As for security, when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, many utilities were damaged and asked for help. Other utilities, including mine, were willing to deploy and assist, but there was a lot of confusion. That launched an effort within our sector to be more resilient and better prepared to respond. The WARN (Water and Wastewater Agency Response Network) effort came out of this period and I'm proud to have played an early role in its development and to have served as chair of the Georgia WARN program. It's satisfying to see utilities better prepared, especially with today's ever looming threat of a cyberattack.

What is a career achievement you're proud of? I've obtained all three Georgia water licenses and worked with, trained, and learned from some of the best people I've ever know during my career. I've worked with new treatment technology over the years and helped conceive and build new treatment facilities to deliver higher quality water.

What do you like most about working in water? It's an awesome feeling to know that what I – and countless other water professionals around the world – do on a daily basis assures public health through safe water. It really came into perspective for me when I made my first Water For People trip to Honduras in 1993. It's shocking to see the other side of adverse conditions, where communities don't have access to clean, safe water and experience increased deaths due to waterborne disease. That trip set the path for the rest of my career, and I went on to serve five years as chair of that committee, making multiple trips to Honduras to install or evaluate projects.

How have you benefited from your involvement with the water community? I started volunteering in the water sector in 1990 when Neal Spivey, my director at Gwinnett County, gave me a camera and asked me to take photos and write an article while attending a

local water conference. He published my article and photos in the Georgia Operator Magazine and planted the seed for me to do more. I had the opportunity to represent AWWA on a visit to the White House along with my friend, Mike Howe from the Texas Section. I discovered that while you're serving or volunteering, you're receiving an incredible benefit at the same time that outweighs the energy you put in. You develop skills as a water professional by being exposed to challenges, environmental policy, peers of superb energy and intellect, and the experience of presenting.

I've found that volunteering and serving others are some of the best ways to glorify God. The more you do in service to others, the more your light shines. That gets the attention of others and gets them engaged. We need to shine more light on our industry to attract folks to fill the absences due to retirement.

What advice do you have for upcoming water leaders? Be empathetic and a team player. If you're struggling with something, ask for help or guidance. Get outside your comfort zones and engage in new things, because you will truly never know your strengths and capabilities until you have faith and test yourself. The more you do in service to others, the more your light shines.

Please describe your family and interests. My wife, Bridget, and I have three children and four grandchildren. I enjoy camping, fly fishing, woodworking, cooking and running my hardwood smoker. I'm an ordained minister, and part of my ministry for myself is to perform wedding ceremonies at no cost and donate my appearance as Santa for charity organizations doing fundraisers. I enjoy volunteering and being a member of the Masonic Fraternity. I enjoy riding my motorcycle with charity organizations, especially the Water Buffalos. I currently serve as president and made our annual Buffalo Run to ACE in Anaheim, California – just 2,200 miles away from my home in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Anything you'd like to add? One of my favorite quotes is, "The world will step aside and let anyone pass as long as they know where they're going." I'm thankful for everyone who has had a part in helping me find my way and shown me the direction in which I needed to go. AWWA had a big part in that!