

Up to the Challenge

From President of
NUCA to the 2006
“Ditchdigger of
the Year,” Cheryl
Yoder Has Made a
Career of Getting
Things Done

By Nick Zubko

No one ever said being a leader was easy. When Cheryl Yoder was featured on the cover of *Utility Contractor* two years ago, she was just beginning her term as the 2005-2006 president of the National Utility Contractors Association (NUCA). But on her way up the ranks, her story took more than a few unexpected turns, not to mention hit the occasional bump in the road. Through it all, she's always managed to do whatever needed to be done. As she has said, “Troubleshooting and problem-solving are traits every leader needs in order to succeed.”

Yoder first got involved in her local chapter, the Suncoast Utility Contractors Association (SUCA) back in the late 1980s to learn about legislation that might help her company at the time (Terra Excavating) out of a jam. Once that problem was resolved, her desire to learn more about the industry drove her to take on increasing levels of involvement at the national level as well. She climbed the ranks of NUCA through the 1990s, first participating and eventually chairing committees.

By 2001, she had been named to NUCA's executive committee and became only the third female president in the association's history. During her term, she faced the daunting challenge of presenting monumental changes to the membership structure – a decision that was not free from opposition. While there

certainly have been much easier times to be president, Yoder says that despite the hardship she was glad to be a part of such an important change.

“It was a very tough time,” says Yoder. “But throughout my career, I have learned many valuable lessons that really helped me be the leader I needed to be at that particular time for the association. I credit not only the support I received from others, but also my own drive to make NUCA a better association. In the end, it was gratifying to see that you really can make a difference.”

The difference Yoder has made was probably demonstrated most clearly during her term as president of NUCA, when she exhibited a rare dedication and willingness to make difficult choices for the betterment of the industry. But in reality, her career has been full of equally notable examples. To honor her efforts throughout her 27-year career in the utility construction business, NUCA recently named Yoder its 2006 “Ditchdigger of the Year.”

Learning the Ropes

Having received her degree in business administration with sights set on either a CPA or a graduate degree in accounting, Yoder started her professional career as bank teller. Her time at the bank was short-lived, however, as she was denied maternity leave and relieved of her position. But as one door closed, another one opened when one of her regular bank customers from Terra Excavating, a utility construction company in Largo, Fla., offered her a job as secretary and administrative assistant.

“That’s how it all started,” Yoder recalls. “I didn’t know anything about the business except how to do business. I started dispatching trucks, learning the equipment and running up the ranks. I knew what they did, but I didn’t really have an understanding of the industry itself. It was just construction to me at the time.”

By 1989, Yoder was general manager and a junior partner. By then, she had — at one time or another — tried her hand at every part of the business as the situation demanded. When the purchaser was gone, she learned how to purchase equipment. When the field superintendent was gone, she ran the projects.

“Over time, the superintendents and owners taught me the business,” says Yoder. “I wasn’t afraid to try anything, and my attitude has always been that if a thing needs to be done, I’ll do the best job I can.”

Yoder stayed on with Terra after it was sold in 1999 to help ensure a smooth transition, but by 2004 she had



Yoder’s career has taken her all over Florida. Recently, however, she found a new home with Jacksonville-based A.J. Johns Inc.

decided it was time to resign and move on. “My time at Terra allowed me to recognize my own strengths, and then channel that to make a difference in what I was doing,” she explains. “But whenever a company is sold, the new owners always have their own ideas of how things should be done. And it was better that once I finished my employment agreement with Terra — which was conditioned upon the sale — that I try my hand at some other things.”

It wasn’t long before she was offered a new position as CFO at Johnson-Davis Inc., a company run by Scott Johnson, who happened to be a long-time friend and colleague on the board of the Underground Utility Contractors of Florida (UUCF). Johnson-Davis was more of a traditional underground utility contractor than Terra (which also did a considerable amount of site work); it was about the same size as Terra, had the same number of workers and the same size of equipment. So, for Yoder, it was a perfect fit.

“Scott [Johnson] knew me through the association and offered me the position. It worked out very well for both of us,” Yoder recalls. “I wasn’t involved as much in the field as I was under Terra; I was more involved in the accounting and financial side of it as CFO. But I had already done both. Terra didn’t have strict lines with titles; the GM at Terra handled the accounting as well. I have always liked a mixture of the two roles.”

Yoder’s stay at Johnson-Davis was also cut short (only about two years), when she left to move back home to Largo to be with her mother who was having some health problems. Yoder found temporary work as a consultant

for the Myers Group, but once her mother was fully recovered, she accepted an offer from Jacksonville-based AJ Johns Inc., which had been on the table for over a year. She just moved into her new office this April.

“A.J. Johns approached me more than a year ago,” she explains. “And we had been talking for some time, but it really got serious in late fall. So, I have come on full-time with them, and I am very pleased. They are back into the site and utility side of the business, which I like. I have known A.J., who is a strong NUCA member, for many years, and Ryan Schmitt (vice president of A.J. Johns Inc.) and I have worked together on both the state and national boards. As secretary of NUCA’s Executive Committee, Ryan is now in line for the presidency. When he assumes that position, we’ll have two NUCA shovels on the wall around here.”

Making a Difference

In one of her early messages as NUCA president, Yoder wrote: “We join NUCA to have a voice on Capitol Hill — a voice that will help protect our industry from unnecessary or backbreaking laws and regulations and see that adequate funding is appropriated for legislation that creates work for the underground utility construction industry.” It is, therefore, not surprising that Yoder’s association involvement began with a simple problem — one that required some government lobbying.

During her time with Terra Excavating, Pinellas County mandated that utility contractors had to be state certified before they could renew their occupational licenses. Caught off guard by the requirement, Terra and other area contractors in the same predicament were able to persuade the county administrator to grant them a stay until they could take their certification test.

Yoder says she decided then and there to find an association that would keep her abreast of legislative and regulatory issues and developments that could affect her company. She found two — the Suncoast Utility Contractors Association and the National Utility Contractors Association.

“I joined legislative committees at the local, state and national levels and tried to figure out how the laws affected me from the top down and the bottom up,” says Yoder. “I joined committees, chaired a few functions and started working on local and state issues. It was the legislative aspect that got me involved in the beginning and evolved from there. And, once your involvement lands you on a board of directors, you can’t just sit there. You’ve got to give it your best effort.”

By the time she became president of NUCA in 2005, Yoder says she was fortunate to have learned what her strengths were and how to stay true to them in order to be the leader NUCA needed her to be during a difficult transition that involved significant changes to the association’s membership structure. These changes had been talked about for several years, but as plans actually began to develop a few months before Yoder’s term, everyone began to realize that it was going to be a difficult year.



Yoder was honored as “Ditchdigger of the Year” as a result of her leadership during her term as president of NUCA, but also for her years of service leading up to it.

“We were planning on making small changes in a step-by-step manner, but for some in the association it became a ‘draw-a-line-in-the-sand’ situation,” Yoder recalls. “So we had to make a decision, and we did it together as a board. We made the tough decision to go ahead with the plans. It was the right thing to do. The association is growing for the first time in years, and it’s a credit to that difficult decision.”

The Next Step

Throughout NUCA’s history, every Ditchdigger of the Year has exhibited something that makes them stand out. Typically, they have made a difference on the big issues. For Yoder, it was undoubtedly her leadership as NUCA president that played a significant role in her selection. But it was also the years of service that led up to it.

“They look at all your past service to the association at the local, state and national levels and at your commitment to the industry as a whole,” she explains. “It’s not one act. It’s about consistency. That is what a Ditchdigger has — a consistent level of passion and commitment over a long period of time.”

Today, Yoder says she doesn’t look at things any differently than she did before being president, and she’s certain that there is still a lot left for her to do. “Some people think that once you attain that position you can rest on your laurels,” says Yoder. “Well, that’s not me. I’m always willing to learn new things and to search for places where I can put my experience to good use. It keeps me growing — and it keeps me young.”

Nick Zubko is associate editor of *Utility Contractor*.