

Faces of Risk Management:

Julie Baecker Lageson

The best way to tell the story of URMIA and the growth of the profession is through the voices of our members. In this series, we explore our history through our members' own stories, photos and memories.

Recollections from the Last Frontier: The impacts of professional mentorship and long-term involvement in URMIA

I ended up in the “Last Frontier” in 1975 and worked trans-Alaska pipeline jobs until it was all over. In 1979 at age 21, I began working for the University of Alaska. For anyone looking for a chance to step into a void and create a culture, environment, and define the meaning of risk management, the University of Alaska was the place to be. However, like many adventures I have experienced and enjoyed in my life, I had no idea what I was doing, nor did I have an inkling of what the future held for my employer and me.

In 1979, my boss, Ike Charlton, an active member of URMIA for many years, worked in the accounting services department as the insurance and records manager. We were the “system office” for three main campuses (Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau) and 13 colleges extending across Alaska. I began my career working in the basement of the library as a temporary employee, sorting through stacks of unmarked boxes, identifying and recording the contents. I performed these tasks so superbly that my boss asked if I would like to begin to study the claims adjusting industry with the goal of bringing claims handling in-house. He projected cost savings, increased efficiency, better data tracking, and quicker accessibility. Already a member of URMIA, Ike had a vision for expanding services for the benefit of the health and safety of staff, students, and the public. At that time, within the entire University of Alaska system, the risk and safety positions consisted of the insurance manager (my boss) and a safety guy at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks campus.

After achieving my Associate in Claims designation through the Insurance Institute of America and becoming licensed through the State of Alaska, I became the university’s first claims adjuster. (During this same time period, I was building my own house about 15 miles north of the university on some land that had no road to it, electricity, or running water. The university became my home away from home; I was able to take showers, iron my clothes, re-charge my car batteries that I used to power my turntable and amp, and use the adjoining records management lab to clean and package the salmon I was catching. It was a good gig in more than one way!).

Julie Baecker Lageson, AIC, ARM, DRM, was chief risk officer at the University of Alaska and served on URMIA’s Board of Directors (2009-2012). In 2012, Julie received URMIA’s highest honor, the Distinguished Risk Manager award, for her contributions to the profession and the association.



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My boss was also busy during this time period trying to expand services and implement risk and safety best practices. With ever-vigilant attention to cost and finance, he eventually obtained approval to hire a system safety officer. Our department grew from two to three.

In the next couple of years, Ike and I were successful in bringing claims handling in-house. All these years later, it remains in-house. Through annual analysis of the claims costs, frequency, and severity, we were able to demonstrate to senior management that this was a successful structure that saves the university money through hands-on, personalized service and improves the morale of employees and staff regarding the workers' compensation system, the majority of our claims experience. Property and auto claims were pretty straightforward. Serious liability and marine claims were worked in close, cooperative relationship with the attorneys' office. I was fortunate in that the attorneys were great to work with, happy to share their knowledge, and allowed me to be an active participant in claims that resulted in litigation. I was fascinated with law, and we ended up being great partners.

As time went on, I became more interested in the work my boss was doing as regards risk management, which was pretty much in its infancy at the University of Alaska. Most people I spoke with did not know what the term meant. My boss had a couple of serious illnesses that led to opportunity for me. Please, reader, do not think that I was not concerned about my boss; I was. But bottom line, I got to travel to London two times in his place to meet with our underwriters there. And best of all, I was able to attend URMIA conferences! Ike Charlton knew the value of URMIA. He attended every conference, served on the board, and hosted a conference in Alaska. But his involvement meant I had to attend RIMS as only one "outside" (i.e. lower 48 states) professional conference was allowed per year, and his philosophy was to cover as many bases as we could between the two of us. I learned from and enjoyed the RIMS conferences, but they were not nearly as impactful as URMIA. Once my boss retired, I took the helm, immediately began to attend URMIA conferences, and found a real welcome and home within the organization.

I obtained my Associate in Risk Management (ARM) designation and was excited to be able to apply my new knowledge to help my institution advance its culture and provide service to the employees and staff. I found interest and acceptance generally prevailed when it came to learning how to reduce risks. Most managers truly wanted to reduce the risk of their operations and be fully informed before venturing forth with new programs; they welcomed our efforts to assist. I thoroughly enjoyed working in the field, learning about the many diverse and interesting programs and activities and helping departments work through sticky risk situations.

Like many institutions, we fluctuated in staffing dependent upon budgets. Typical of many institutions at that time, there was little understanding by senior management of the importance of risk management and safety. With a great deal of effort and, most importantly, persistence, I was able to convince top management that, in order to keep our president fully informed and able to make intelligent decisions, we required more staffing to get a handle on operations across our very large state and multiple campuses. I found URMIA to be a huge resource and support for me during these times. Networking with other risk management and safety professionals across the country enabled me

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to bring additional perspectives and illustrate best practices for top management. Eventually, over a period of several years, I was able to hire a claims manager, a risk management analyst, a director of environmental health and safety, and an emergency management director. We had evolved from a staff of two (me and my boss) to a staff of 12: chief risk officer, director of EHS, director of emergency management, a claims manager, a risk analyst, and seven additional support staff.

Because I worked in the system office, there was a certain amount of uncertainty, disagreement, and debate about the role the system should play with the campuses. Throughout my career, there was constant friction regarding these roles, in every level of the organization, resulting in lack of prioritization, lack of funding, and unrealistic and unmet expectations. After looking to top management to define our role for many, many years, I decided to define roles and responsibilities system-wide in conjunction with our Risk Management Team (RMT).

I believe it was the late 1980s or early 1990s by the time each main campus had hired at least one person dedicated to safety. At that point, I was the claims manager and my boss and our safety manager had started meeting with the campus safety employees on a fairly regular basis. This structure eventually evolved into what we called the RMT. When I became the director of the system office, the group consisted of a safety representative from each main campus. I expanded it to include a representative from each practice area under our purview: claims, insurance, risk, safety, and emergency management. The RMT met on a quarterly basis and communicated daily between formal meetings. I based the draft "Division of Responsibilities Between System Office and Campuses" document on practices that were already efficient and well managed, existing resources, and the campuses' expressed desires for control and management. Once the RMT was in agreement with the division, the document was sent to the university president and the three chancellors for approval. Once approved, the document became the basis of all future operations as regards roles and responsibilities and was codified in university policy and regulation.

Risk and safety was a developing culture and, too often, was not at the forefront of top management's agenda and received minimal resources at some locations. The RMT goal was to elevate the awareness of these issues and advocate for appropriate dedication of resources and safe campuses. Together, we developed an audit process whereby each campus received periodic visits from the system office EHS and emergency management directors. Compliance with state and federal regulations and laws as well as internal



URMIA's 2011 Annual Conference, Portland, OR

Julie Baecker Lageson (wearing an arm cast) with colleagues and friends at the URMIA Annual Conference Opening Reception.



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policies and regulations were evaluated. A quarterly report was compiled and provided to the president of the university, the three campus chancellors, and the board of regents covering three main areas: claims, safety, and emergency management.

A next step in broadening the risk management culture was to implement Enterprise Risk Management (ERM). I credit and thank URMIA for exposing me to the concept of ERM and providing the education, tools, and resources to develop a program at my institution. The director of internal audit and I were very successful in collaborating to bring ERM to the university. We developed a training program that we presented to senior staff at all three main campuses and the system office. We facilitated the initial risk assessments and also provided reporting to the president and the board of regents on the results of these risk assessments. To ensure continuity, I also codified the concept and process of ERM in board of regents' policy and regulation.

The culmination of my 32.5 years at the University of Alaska, and one of the biggest accomplishments of my career, was to elevate the reporting line of the chief risk officer directly to the president of the university. Throughout my time at the university, I reported to the university architect and several finance officers. During one of many restructuring events I endured, there was a proposal to place risk management under the director of procurement. Although the insurance and claims side of our risk services department fit well within finance, risk management did not. We had broadened our services to include safety oversight, emergency management, and enterprise risk management. The information, management, and degree of accountability in these areas of practice needed to be provided, without filter, directly to the president. The campuses needed to understand that the president placed a high degree of importance and priority on these practice areas. The change in reporting was accomplished through discussion with the president, drafting proposed university policy and regulation, and presenting them to top management and the board of regents for approval via policy and regulation.

URMIA was one of the major sources of energy for my internal engine. I believe a great many of us working in the field in the 1980s and 1990s felt quite alone. I know I felt like I was pushing a boulder uphill for much of my career. URMIA was a refuge. As colleagues, we understood the challenges, provided support, and shared our successes and failures. In addition to maintaining a membership of extremely intelligent, dedicated, and driven people, the organization is one of genuine care and friendship. I was honored to be able to serve on the board of directors for five years, serve on and chair committees, participate in a think tank with one of our affiliates, and host an annual conference in Alaska in 2004. Thinking back to those days in 1979 when I began my work with naiveté, I never expected to have such a wonderful, fulfilling career and develop such an amazing relationship with a professional organization. I will always be grateful for URMIA and for my boss who believed in me and encouraged me to expand my skills and utilize my natural abilities to the fullest extent possible.

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