

# Faces of Risk Management:

## Gary Langsdale

*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.*

### Being in the right place at the right time: Or “I could write a book!”

My career in risk management has developed by an unusual series of coincidences, wherein I was given the opportunity to step into the shoes of other risk managers who had chosen to retire. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, on multiple occasions. After spending six years in the claims department at Liberty Mutual Insurance Company, I was hired by Equitable Gas Company to replace their risk/claims supervisor, who had retired. I spent three years there and got a call from my all-time mentor in risk management, who was the risk manager at Hammermill Paper Company, which was an account in my portfolio at Liberty Mutual. He was retiring, and he wanted me to apply for his position. I did, and was hired.

Three years later, Hammermill was acquired by International Paper. Their risk manager told me that he didn't have any openings, and I should look for something else. The very next day, I received a call from Simpson Investment Company, a holding corporation for a forest products company in Seattle, looking to replace their risk manager, who had retired. I got the job, and my family moved to Seattle. We spent 10 years there, and then I got a call from International Paper's risk manager telling me he was about to retire and I should apply; it happened again, and we moved to Memphis and spent 10 years there. We realized the need to be closer to aging parents, and a job posting miraculously appeared in *Business Insurance* magazine for a risk manager for Penn State University, because – you guessed it – their risk manager (Mike Klein) had retired.

Back to my all-time mentor, Jim Hooton at Hammermill. Jim was a submarine service veteran of World War II, spent time in property insurance underwriting, and then became risk manager at Hammermill. He was his own harshest critic, deep in his religious faith and loyal to the company and – more importantly - all of

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its employees, from the janitor to the president. He knew how every piece of machinery in the factory worked, could mix it up equally with the millwrights and the CFO, and was universally respected. He had a great sense of humor but took his work seriously, and he enjoyed using his career to give examples of failure and success. He was very strong in his convictions of right and wrong, and common sense was his greatest attribute. I still occasionally ask myself, "What would Jim do in this situation?"

When I arrived at Penn State, I had 25 years of risk management under my belt and thought I had seen one of everything, until my eyes were opened by everything that happens at a university. I was on the job only a few months when someone mentioned an organization called URMIA – and wow, what a resource! I was blown away by the great sessions on exactly what I needed to know at my first URMIA Annual Conference (Anchorage, 2004). I also remember chatting with some guy named Bill (Payton from University of Missouri and the URMIA President at the time) about the broker contingent commission conundrum, and a week later he called and asked me to chair a task force to write a paper about it. I was an instant volunteer and have been involved in one way or another ever since.

In all enterprises including higher education, risk management has become more about "risk" and less about "insurance," although there will certainly always be a critical role for risk financing. I believe that more institutions are leaning on their risk managers for broader advice, and their leaders see us as potentially important players. As this is written, I am completing a temporary assignment as interim chief ethics and compliance officer for the university. It's not my smiling face or sparkling wit that got me a seat at the table – it is that risk management is an important attribute and we've built a "trust" among the administrators and faculty that we can be called upon to assist.



**URMIA's 2011 Annual Conference, Portland, OR**

Gary with Bill Payton, who served as URMIA President at Gary's first annual conference and enlisted him early on as a volunteer in the association.



**URMIA's 2013 Annual Conference, Phoenix, AZ**  
Gary presides over the URMIA Business Meeting before passing the presidential gavel to Anita Ingram, University of Cincinnati (URMIA president, 2013-2014).

People frequently ask what keeps me awake at night, assuming that the answer will involve a 107,000-seat football stadium, or the nuclear reactor which shares a driveway with the child care center, or 1,200 recognized student organizations at the flagship campus alone. Actually, it's (mostly) none of these.

Instead, I say something like, "There are things that I know I know, and there are things I know that I don't know. But there are also things I don't know that I don't know, and that's what worries me."



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People frequently ask what keeps me awake at night, assuming that the answer will involve the 107,000-seat football stadium, or the nuclear reactor which shares a driveway with the child care center, or 24 academic campuses scattered across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, or 1,200 recognized student organizations at the flagship campus alone, or research faculty traveling to who-knows-where and doing who-knows-what, or the 220,000 youth we serve on our campuses every year. Actually, it's (mostly) none of these; our former senior vice president of finance and business liked to say, "We're pretty good at being pretty big." Instead, when people ask what worries me most, I borrow from Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defense in 1975-1977 and 2001-2006, and say something like, "There are things that I know I know, and there are things I know that I don't know. But there are also things I don't know that I don't know, and that's what worries me."

As to URMIA, it is truly a great organization. I have learned so much from all my peers about higher education, from all the affiliate organization representatives about insurance and risk management concepts, and from the National Office staff members who always have the right answer to keep URMIA on an even keel. I remember – and still use – a phrase that someone exclaimed at my first annual conference: "Welcome to higher education, where no decision is too small for study by a committee!" URMIA is an organization where you can really contribute by answering someone's question on the discussion board; by serving on a committee; by working at the registration desk at the annual conference and just greeting people; or by painting or cleaning up at a shelter – or yes, even knitting a baby's hat – at an URMIAcares event.

Although I prefer to work behind the scenes and am not usually one for the limelight, I have had some pretty proud moments in my time with URMIA. I was asked to serve the organization as Parliamentarian from 2007 through 2011; successfully co-chaired the URMIA Annual Conference with Brian Cappo (Carnegie Mellon) in Pittsburgh in 2010; and was humbled to be elected president for 2012-2013, right in the middle of a crisis at our university. The epitome of a proud moment was when I was shocked to hear my own name at the end of what seemed like a long speech, to be awarded URMIA's highest honor as a Distinguished Risk Manager – being recognized by my peers, at the 2014 URMIA Annual Conference. For a poor boy from the wrong side of the tracks in Pittsburgh, this is better than I deserve!



**URMIA's 2014 Annual Conference, Louisville, KY**  
Gary Langsdale received URMIA's highest honor, the Distinguished Risk Manager award. At top, he is pictured with fellow 2014 DRM recipient Steve Bryant, Texas Tech University System (left).

