

# President's Comments

By Al Parrella

For those that don't know me please let me introduce myself. I am currently the Manager of Operations and Maintenance for the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District in Duluth. Never in my wildest dreams would I have believed that my career would take the path that it did. After college I was lucky enough to find employment in the wastewater treatment field. They had just built a brand new state-of-the-art treatment facility in Duluth to treat both municipal and industrial (paper mill) waste and were looking for operations staff. I was lucky to be hired. That was 37 years ago.

Why do I love this field? There are so many reasons.

There is always something new to learn, or see, or do; there is always a new problem to solve, a new technology to discover, and so many great people to work with. We are a different sort of industry. In most industries, the goal is to make money by making a product, whether it be paper, or cars, or widgets. In our industry we make clean water. This is something we can feel good about. However, there is a down side. The raw material never stops coming in. We can't ever shut our systems completely down for maintenance. This inspires some very creative and ingenious ideas for getting the work done.

It is easy to be passionate about our field of work, and it's a good thing, too, because it demands a lot from us. Whether you are from a smaller community or work in a larger facility, you know that even when you are on your own time, there are pipes and pumps and process equipment that must do their jobs so that you are in compliance.

In the time I have been with my employer I have had many different jobs. One was operating rotary drum vacuum filters for sludge dewatering. That operation was hard on both the equipment and staff, and they were shut down after just four years to make way for new technology. Change has been a constant through my career, as it is with everyone else's.

I started at the bottom in February, 1979 at the WLSSD plant. As those of you in the industry know, the bottom at the wastewater plant is a very low place indeed. Having an academic background but no formal training in wastewater treatment I was always a bit envious of those who knew early on what they wanted in a career and had set out to educate themselves so they could hit the ground running in a collection system or treatment plant. To this day I have the greatest respect for the various technical colleges and the graduates from their water sciences programs. These are some of the best operators that I know. I always felt the need to try to catch up with



## ***President's Comments Continued***

what these graduates already knew.

After five years on shift work, I was promoted to a foreman position. The lead worker has a rewarding but sometimes difficult position of being in the middle, between operations staff, the maintenance crew, and management. Learning something new every day was part of the job, and remains so to this day.

But enough about me. You in the MWOA are a dedicated, hard-working group of individuals that devote your working life to keeping things clean and safe for others, both people and wildlife. That is one of the reasons that I look forward to the MWOA annual conference, and that I enjoy it so much. Minnesota is a special, rich, diverse state and is fortunate to have you to help protect it from the harmful, polluting effects of routine daily human activities. My biggest concern for the future is whether or not we can find enough people to enter our field. Ours is an often misunderstood and sadly sometimes disrespected field.

As President, I will make it my business to continue to advocate for our industry and to recommend it as a career. Our jobs require skill and often hard work but they are essential and rewarding. I could not ask for much more.