

FEATURE

Meet the new chair

Tim Griffin talks to *District Energy* about his background, industry trends and his theme for the year, "Sustaining Our Success."



Editor's note: Tim Griffin was recently elected IDEA chair at the association's 107th Annual Conference and Trade Show in St. Paul. He is a principal and regional manager with RMF Engineering Inc., a firm specializing in district energy system planning, design and commissioning. A registered engineer and a LEED Accredited Professional, Griffin has a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering from North Carolina State University and a Master of Business Administration degree from Colorado State University. He authored the book *Winning With Millennials: How to Attract, Retain, and Empower Today's Generation of Design Professionals*. He also serves as IDEA's liaison with the U.S. Green Building Council.

Q You have worked with RMF Engineering for 19 years. What are the major areas of responsibility in your current job?

Tim Griffin: When I joined RMF in North Carolina, our Raleigh office was the only satellite office and had only a handful of people. Over my time with RMF, I have watched the Raleigh location grow to become one of the largest engineering offices in our region with a reputation for both technical excellence and client service; and I've seen key leaders from Raleigh step out to plant the flag in both Charlotte and Atlanta as our firm has grown from two offices to 11. Today, I provide

oversight to the leaders in these three offices, serve on RMF's board of directors and head the firm's leadership development program – a two-year program designed to train our high-performing, midlevel employees and successfully prepare them to take on key leadership roles moving forward. I still get involved in projects as well, from district energy plant design and commissioning to project management on campus building projects. However, my niche technical focus is helping district energy owners and operators position their systems in a way that helps their building customers achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification. All this is only possible because I am blessed to be surrounded by a talented team of leaders dedicated to delivering great solutions to our clients.

Q What do you see as the key trends in the energy industry today?

TG: Sustainability continues to be a game changer that is here to stay. We are not moving toward a less sustainable world. Sustainability is not a fad. Some in our business see this as a threat. I see it as an opportunity. District energy, in many cases, is not only the right solution for a host of traditional

reasons but the most sustainable solution as well.

Q What is the most rewarding part of your job?

TG: That's easy: seeing leaders grow up around me. Nothing brings me greater satisfaction than seeing them succeed. The first cooperative education student I hired 18 years ago as a 19-year-old college sophomore is now a partner in the firm and leading our Atlanta office. I have others now leading our commissioning teams, our district energy design teams and our building mechanical, electrical and plumbing teams that have become leaders in our industry. Their success brings me great satisfaction. They say it is lonely at the top; I say it does not have to be if you take people with you. I have also had the pleasure of working for some great clients who are really trying to make a difference in their organizations. Just yesterday, Jorge Quintal, a client now with the University of North Carolina in Greensboro for whom I first started working 19 years ago, looked at me with a smile and said RMF should be proud of the great reputation we have established in the district energy industry; and he mentioned some of the people in our firm he has watched grow from interns into successful industry leaders. I get so busy sometimes that I forget to stop and think

about it. His word of encouragement was priceless.

Q District energy managers are facing a significant challenge in replacing the experienced engineers and operators who are scheduled to retire over the next decade. What can IDEA members do to help attract qualified young professionals to our industry?

TG: This relates to the previous answer as well. Many industries are dealing with this challenge. Young people don't know about our industry. We can't create tools that will reach them en masse. However, we can still reach them individually. What RMF has done very successfully is reach out to engineering students looking for cooperative education/internship positions. We bring them in and, as a result, introduce them to our industry. In our Raleigh office alone we have hired about 100 co-ops during my tenure and brought on 25 of those into full-time positions upon graduation. The program has allowed us to offer permanent jobs to only the best of the best. Without the co-op experience they never would have considered our industry. Most firms focus on co-ops/internships as low-cost labor. Our focus is on finding and hiring key, long-term employees. Today, we have people in our firm – from entry level to the board of directors – who came through this program. In fact, long-time IDEA member and past chair Bob Smith is one of them. He likes to say his first job was sweeping the floors, and he has never quite gotten rid of that task. Maybe so, but those who know Bob understand the value of having him spend his entire career at RMF. We need more of our members to use co-op/internship programs in their organizations to both introduce and attract talented young people to our industry.

Q As IDEA's liaison to the U.S. Green Building Council, you've advocated for language in LEED guidelines that allows building owners to earn points for being connected to a district energy system. How can we, as IDEA members,

continue to ensure that the environmental benefits of thermal networks are given fair recognition in the LEED program?

TG: We need to continue to be engaged with the USGBC and other organizations like it. We need to be the “go-to” resource for them and others who need information on district energy. With the USGBC we have been successful in doing so over the past five years, but we need to continue delivering timely information to them about our industry to stay relevant. Also, we have to constantly look for areas in which our two organizations' interests align and focus on working together on those issues.

Q What is the PEER program, and why is it important to IDEA members?

TG: For years, I have been asked this question by our members: “Does getting LEED certification on my district energy system help my building customers achieve LEED certification on their buildings?” While you can get LEED certification on your plant, it does not help your building customers with their LEED goals at all. PEER, which is short for Performance Excellence in Electricity Renewal, will change this. PEER certification of a district energy system not only communicates the sustainable nature of that system but also makes the LEED certification process easier for the system's building customers. [For a more detailed explanation of PEER, see Tim's “LEED + District Energy” column in First Quarter 2016 *District Energy*.]

Q What is the overall theme for your term as IDEA chair?

TG: I wrestled a lot with this one. I actually went back and looked at the last nine chairs' themes. The one that struck me was my colleague Bob Smith's theme from 2007, “Sustain, Energize and Grow.” I remember that when he first presented this theme during his acceptance speech, it was the first time I knew of that sustainability was addressed as part of a chair's theme. Also, his overall theme proved to be prophetic, as the asso-

ciation had 834 members at the time, and now our membership exceeds 2,000. We certainly did grow. My theme is “Sustaining Our Success.” It is hard to argue the success of a 100-plus-year-old organization. However, sustaining our future success will be more challenging than first achieving it. There are generations behind us that we must pass the baton to. I want to focus on issues that will both build on our organization's legacy and position us for future success.

Q If you could send our members out into their communities with one principal message, what would that be?

TG: Focus on adding value. The world is changing at an ever-faster pace. However, these changes create tremendous opportunity for district energy. Instead of worrying about the threats to our industry, or even trying to push district energy as the solution in all situations, focus on the opportunities where it is the right solution and provides tremendous value.

Q What are the most valuable lessons you've taken away from IDEA conferences?

TG: This may sound weird, but I have been surprised to learn that the engineering field in general, and our industry specifically, attracts a lot of what can be best described as wonderful people. People who are intelligent and resourceful but also who are high on the integrity scale, care about other people and truly want to make a difference. So, through this I have learned that if you hire the right people, invest in their development and give them the autonomy to grow, they will be able to do something special.

Q Who has influenced your development as a business leader?

TG: Many people. Bob Smith, past chair of IDEA, told me many years ago that no matter how much time he invests in volunteering with our association, he always reaps greater benefits than he puts in. I have watched Bob unselfishly demonstrate

this principle by example for years. Jack Colby, a good friend and the past chairman of APPA, also lived the same principle in that organization and coached me to do the same with IDEA. RMF's president and my boss, Duane Pinnix, has coached me, pushed me and, most importantly, been willing to invest heavily in me to allow significant volunteering at IDEA and even in my personal leadership development through an organization called Vistage. Also, Steve McAdams, a colleague and friend, has been faithful to stretch me by challenging some poorly thought-through assumptions I held on business leadership. Their examples and efforts, along with an extremely talented team of leaders growing up with me, have all influenced my development. Plus, IDEA's most recent chairs, Bruce Ander and Ken Smith, have demonstrated by example how to uphold the responsibility of a board member and chair and challenged me to do the same.

Q You authored a best-selling business book on millennial engineers. What inspired you to do so?

TG: I'm fortunate to have the opportunity from time to time to teach business principles to architectural and engineering firm principals across North America. Back around 2007 I noticed that nothing was frustrating principals more than the kids coming out of college. These kids were the early members of the millennial generation. In contrast, my team, comprised mostly of millennials, was having a lot of success in business. I began to research the subject and found other firms that had also tapped into what I refer to as the "millennial code." The purpose of the book was to provide a resource for engineering managers who wanted to attract the best and brightest of this generation to their firms and to create a culture in which millennials would want to spend their careers and unleash their energy toward driving their organization's success. As a result, the book has given me a platform to travel and teach on the



Beth and Tim Griffin with their children Nathan, Stephen, Luba and Sarah.

subject and has connected me with engineers across the globe.

Q How do you like to spend your free time when you're not on the job?

TG: Well, before our annual campus energy conference in Denver last year, I would have put downhill skiing on the list, but an ACL tear on a preconference ski trip that winter has made me timid about returning to the slopes. Overall, though, I love going

on adventures with my family, both immediate and extended. My wife and I have four teenagers who love to water and snow ski, hike, scuba dive and travel. We like to take them to our national conferences so they can see more of North America. In fact, we are looking forward to our next adventure in Scottsdale at the 2017 Annual Conference and Trade Show. We're already planning on doing a rafting trip in the Grand Canyon. 🌐

INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT ENERGY ASSOCIATION

Your industry voice in Washington, D.C.

IDEA is actively engaged in advocacy for district energy/CHP in energy legislation and environmental regulations. With the active support of IDEA members, we can increase our visibility as an industry and make district energy a more integral part of America's energy future.

We urge you to get involved today!

For more information, visit www.districtenergy.org or contact Rob Thornton at rob.idea@districtenergy.org or 508.366.9339.