

Engaging the Young Professional

Spotlighting the NextGen Initiative

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Now in only its third year, the American Fire Sprinkler Association's NextGen Initiative (NGI) is forging ahead with a membership of diverse professional and personal backgrounds looking to grow their professional network and their career. NGI provides high-quality networking events to career-minded individuals aged 40 and under in the fire sprinkler industry.

One of the fastest growing young professionals groups in the industry, NGI was formed in 2014 by an unstoppable trio – then Chairman of the Board Joe Heinrich, Bamford Fire Sprinkler Co., Inc., Salina, Kansas; Meaghen Wills, Anchor Fire Protection, Perkiomenville, Pennsylvania; and the late Allison Rees,

Sunland Fire Protection, Inc., Jamestown, North Carolina. At AFSA's January 2014 quarterly committee and Board meeting, Heinrich had a realization that AFSA's leadership needed to begin to look toward the next generation, so reached out to Rees and Wills to help him organize the effort.

As one of the youngest faces around the committee table, Wills knew firsthand what needed to be done. Over the next year, she worked with staff to assemble an all-star team of up-and-comers. In its second year, the group, chaired by Wills, worked to establish its goals and objectives. Now in its third year, the Initiative has 15 national work group members and is looking toward the future.

Wills said, "My hopes for the future of NGI are that we eliminate the stigma that my generation and the generations before us continue to manifest about the younger generations. That allows us to think more openly about the changes we need to make as business owners and as leaders within our companies to continue to grow and be successful in the future."

Six of the 14 members are new to the national work group for 2017, and they represent every aspect of the industry from contracting, sales and design to engineering and manufacturing.

One of those new faces is Chris Cranfill of Sunland Fire Protection. He says, "My reason for getting involved is simple, Allison Rees and I had many conversations about getting young people involved at Sunland. Those conversations also involved Allison's ideas of getting the effort started on a national level to make our industry better. [...] When we lost Allison, I made a commitment that whenever the NGI got its footing, I

would help in any manner to make sure it was successful."

Looking Ahead AFSA's NGI has two main goals: to empower and expand at the local AFSA chapter level, and to recruit the next generation into the industry.

Slowly, NGI is gaining traction at the chapter level, building excitement and engaging a new group of members in a way the association never has before. NGI Vice Chair Tiffany Moore, Moore Fire Protection of Issaquah, Washington, says, "I would never have even been involved in our local chapter if it wasn't for the NGI, and I would say the same goes for many of our members. I know I for one, along with my other NextGen, have brought a fresh new perspective, energy and excitement to the group. To us, this is our opportunity to start making a difference in the career path we've chosen to commit to and that makes us all eager to jump in and get our hands dirty!"

One of the group's goals is to have a NGI representative at each and every one of AFSA's 28 local chapters and affiliates.

Cranfill says, "Everyone in our industry has looked in the mirror over the past five to 10 years and hopefully realized that as a whole our industry doesn't have a lot of young people. I think everyone has the desire for their companies to grow and they are starting to think about who is going to do this job or that job in the future. [...] We have to find ways to excite people, motivate people already in the industry, and find the talent that takes our industry to new heights. We could all sit around and just come to work every day and do what we have in front of us, but why not spend time with others that have the same passion and try and make us better?"



LFSA NGI Co-Chairs Lisa Dumas and Whitney Garner (right), hosted a booth at a technical school career fair and informed students about the fire protection industry.

Louisiana Fire Sprinkler Association (LFSA) NGI Co-Chairs Lisa Dumas, Fire-Tech Systems in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Whitney Garner, Ameripipe in Mabelvale, Arkansas, shared their enthusiasm for their industry at a career fair at Baton Rouge technical school, exposing over 900 youth to the opportunities afforded to them in fire protection. Dumas commented, "It went great! We talked to many high school students about the sprinkler industry and the scholarship opportunities."

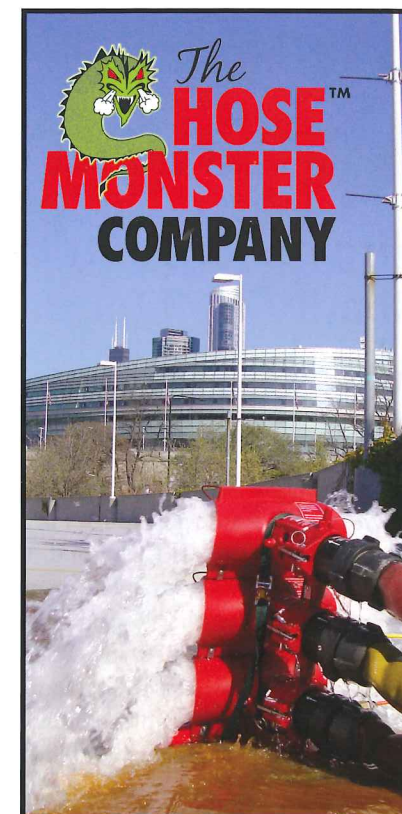
As they look to the future of their industry, the NGI volunteers have had many thoughtful discussions on the ways they can help fill the void. NGI representatives have manned booths at career fairs, and volunteers are currently working on updating some industry recruitment materials.

"As a legacy [in this industry], I'm committed to always give my time and my talent to help progress our mission as sprinkler men and women and to honor what our families have built," says Joshua Leonhardt of Leonhardt Pipe & Supply, Inc. in Huntersville, North Carolina, who is a member of national NGI work group. "There will always be a shortage of young talented workers in our industry, unless we do something now! I think the NextGen-

eration Initiative can help fix that problem. I think the NGI can help improve the technical and communication skills of the younger worker workforce that we have now. The opportunities that the NGI can contribute to our cause are limitless. That's why I'm getting involved!"

Looking to join the industry's most forward-looking young professionals? NGI will host a "NextGen Day" Monday, September 25 during AFSA's convention at Bellagio Las Vegas, featuring a half-day workshop "Leading Across the Generations" presented by Tru Pettigrew. Pettigrew is one of the nation's leading experts on Millennials and has been featured in several publications including the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Fortune*. Bring your rising stars; you won't want to miss this!

Educate your mind. Sharpen your skills. Strengthen your connections. AFSA's NGI is an excellent catalyst for development, but ultimately, it's up to you – our members – to make it happen! If you are age 40 and under and looking help build the future of the industry, get involved. For more details about NGI or about how you can become involved, contact us or visit firesprinkler.org/NextGen. ■



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