

Facilitator — February/March 2015

**CRFP Spotlight**

Rod Towns

What other restaurant companies have you worked for prior to your current position?

Blue Circle, Burger King, Black-eyed Pea/Taco Bueno, Spaghetti Warehouse and Jack-in-the-Box.

After spending so much time in restaurants, do you cook? If so, what is your best dish?

My best dish is anything that my talented wife Brenda prepares for me. Yet, I have been known to work a Char-Griller pretty well, with "char" being the operative term.

What was your first car?

A 1965 Mustang. Not sure whether I owned it or it owned me. I spent so much time under the hood that I had only to show that little six cylinder a wrench and the head bolts would start backing themselves out.

What is your all-time favorite movie?

"Caddy Shack," of course. Sophomoric humor seems to resonate with my level of intellect.

What is the most challenging situation you've ever faced in a facility or on the job? How did you handle it?

Hurricane Ike (2008) in Houston was a zoo! I sat at my home computer and watched a web cam from the University of Houston as Buffalo Bayou rose to engulf the Spaghetti Warehouse in downtown Houston. While the bayou attacked from below, the sewer manhole at the top of the lot looked like a Mt. Vesuvius of water, pounding the side door of the restaurant. At the same time, the winds were rolling the RTUs across the roof.

In most natural disasters, all power and water sources are lost. So, while it is an "emergency," the pressure for the Director of Facilities to reopen the unit immediately is tempered by the mere fact that it is impossible. Luckily, or un-luckily in this case, the restaurant did not lose power. Spaghetti Warehouse is a small chain, and Houston was a top performer. The pressure was on to re-open.

In a rare display of foresight, I had contacted Rainbow International, a disaster recovery company, ahead of time and they had a crew pre-positioned within striking distance of Houston. Since we had power, we began work on day two after the storm, repairing the ceilings, repainting the walls, and removing and replacing the hardwood flooring of this very large two-story restaurant. I arranged for the roof to be replaced and the RTUs to be reset or replaced as needed.

Excellent vendor relations came in to play in this instance. During disasters, all the local vendors' personnel are busy taking care of their personal issues, so help from established vendors is very hard to come by. My walk-in condensing units were in the basement and would not restart after the flooding. Rosenberg out of San Antonio graciously sent a tech to Houston to rectify the issues, and he traveled back and forth to San Antonio for parts until we were fully functioning.

As for me, FEMA had frozen all the available hotel rooms in and around Houston. While the vast majority of them sat empty, they were unavailable. Hotel rooms near Houston with power were booked solid. I commuted almost daily from Dallas to Houston until the café reopened. We were the very first restaurant in Downtown Houston to reopen and we were a booming business with the locals and all the repair crews in the area.

If you weren't a restaurant facility professional, what you would be?

A novelist; so far, that desire is only the subject of daydreams.

What was your very first job?

Blue Circle was a small chain of restaurants in East Tennessee where I grew up. Similar to a small version of a Krystal, they were open 24 hours and served 10-cent square hamburgers along with breakfast and other simple entrees. I was a short-order cook, and my manager, George Whaley, who later went on to a successful career with KFC, taught me my work ethic and set the tone for my career.

What is the best advice you ever received?

I am severely conflicted on this one. "Keep your head low and your mouth shut" was great advice; unfortunately, it's impossible for me to adhere to. Over the years as I encountered peers and supervisors who seemed to be unaffected by pressures and problems, "Don't judge your insides by other people's outsides" helped me to realize that they were most likely suffering the same inner turmoil that I was.

To what would you attribute your success in achieving your CRFP?

With an innate curiosity and an affinity for technical subjects, along with 40+ years of experience and the benefit of some awesome peers and supervisors, I was able to become fairly knowledgeable in a wide variety of facilities management functions.

Would you recommend attaining a CRFP designation to other colleagues? Why?

Absolutely! When I think back to the very beginning, before RFMA even had a name, I think about the goals that we had in mind in creating this organization. One of our main areas of concern was how facilities was perceived by the restaurant industry. By and large, facilities was not highly regarded.

We wanted to "professionalize" our industry, and certification is an essential means to that end. Think of Board Certification for physicians. Setting a minimum level of competency, offering a mechanism for facility managers to validate their competency, and disseminating that information throughout our industry will serve to elevate our stature within each of our organizations and the restaurant industry as a whole. Certification should be a goal of every facility management professional. I believe that the letters "CRFP" following a name will come to serve as a discriminator in the hiring, promotion and retention of facility managers.

What has been the most significant change in the restaurant industry, and how has it affected your job?

The explosion of chains in every conceivable niche cuisine has led to unparalleled competition for the consumer's dollar. This has added immeasurably to the pressures that we each feel as we try to uphold our portion of restaurant operations. This competition, along with unprecedented 24-hour availability through email and cell phones, has transformed all managerial positions within our industry. It now seems almost impossible to get any appreciable period of that rejuvenating downtime that we each so desperately need.

What do you do for fun in your spare time?

Nirvana for me is simply puttering around the house with no pressures or deadlines. Aside from that, spring skiing in Colorado with my twin sons is very hard to beat.

What's the one thing most people would be surprised to learn about you?

In 1968, I circumnavigated the globe, sailing the high seas around both the Cape and the Horn, stopping in St. Thomas, Rio, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. While I would like to claim that it was a solo voyage in my 35-foot blue water ketch, it was actually with 5,000 of my very closest friends aboard the aircraft carrier USS America. Working the flight deck during launch and recovery was great preparation for the hazardous facilities management profession where you constantly have, GMs, DMs, VPs and regulators coming at you from unexpected angles.