

# If You're Not Involved in a Trade Association, You're Missing Out

Camaraderie, networking are critical to success in the wastewater industry, according to Arizona's Dave Bartholomew



In Snapshot, we talk to a member of a state, provincial or national trade association in the decentralized wastewater industry. This time we visit a member of the Arizona Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association.

**Name and title or job description:** Dave Bartholomew, president

**Business name and location:** Bartholomew Water Services, Inc., Phoenix, Arizona

**Services we offer:** Inspection, operation and maintenance of alternative treatment units (ATUs), wastewater collections systems and water reuse facilities. Customers range from individual homes to communities and high-rise buildings.

**Age:** 57

**Years in the industry:** 30 years

**Association involvement:** I've been a member of the Arizona Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (AzOWRA) for 18 years. In 2013

I served as president and I'm currently on the board of directors. I'm also a member of the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association, the National Association of Wastewater Technicians, and the Arizona Water Association. I'm chairman of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality On-Site Wastewater Advisory Committee, and served as chairman of the subdivision stakeholder task force of the Maricopa County Environmental Services Division.

**Benefits of belonging to the association:** AzOWRA provides camaraderie; statewide connections within the industry; access to educational events, training and general good times; and it's great to have colleagues whose expertise, knowledge and positions run the entire spectrum of the water and wastewater world. If you're not active with your state's professional groups, you are really missing out on vital opportunities.

**Biggest issue facing your association right now:** There's a lack of participation by people who really need the benefits of an association — too many people that are "too busy" or "too strapped." Others feel it's a waste of time and money. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes you need to participate in a meaningful and financially beneficial group of like-minded individuals. The power of association is a real game-changer. I find myself leaning heavily on mentors, colleagues, associates and friends. Without comrades, you're alone — and that's no fun.

**Our crew includes:** I must first mention our founder, my dad Richard F. Bartholomew, without whom I would never have gotten into this noble calling. Half my knowledge and training came from his mentorship, the other half from Hard Knocks. Our business model was if he designed it, I would operate it. Second is my son and foreman, Nick Bartholomew. Nick bounced around after the Marine Corps, then got into utility trench work for one of the area's major installers, and finally agreed to work for me as an apprentice technician. He eventually gained enough experience to take over much of the field work that was consuming all my time. Third, our new addition is Ryandrew Peters, a hard worker with a good sense of humor, humble, a straight shooter, with a good head on his shoulders.

**Typical day on the job:** Hopefully the day goes: get up, coffee and eggs, get to the job, repair goes perfectly, get home in time for dinner — but that's never how it goes. Each day has challenges. Like the Marines, you need to adapt and overcome. And that's precisely what it takes — the ability to remain calm, come up with good solutions and make repairs the right way. You may need to keep someone on site running things manually



✓ Dave Bartholomew (foreground) with technician Ryandrew Peters, left, and son Nick Bartholomew pause while performing maintenance on a 14,000-gallon septic tank at Bartlett Lake Marina.

until a part can be obtained; you may have to be there overnight. Don't leave the site until things are under control and running correctly. You sleep better when you're sure your repair will hold.

**The job I'll never forget:** We had a service contract with a youth camp in the pines of northern Arizona. They were required by the state to hire a certified wastewater treatment operator to run the ATU — but the camp ranger insisted he knew best. He would crawl into the manholes, make equipment modifications, mess with pump control settings and turn the system off at night “to conserve power.” Despite multiple complaints to the organization's head council, the problem continued. At one point the ranger and one of the adult volunteers pulled the control panel off and replaced it with one they had “custom engineered.” They were playing with the float controls and pump wiring when we showed up. By doing that, any factory support was voided as well as the “do not tamper” clause in my contract. The ranger also tampered with the drinking water system and was eventually fired.

**My favorite piece of equipment:** When I was still working for my father as chief operator at the Phoenix-Goodyear Airport South superfund site, one day on the drive home I saw a shiny object by the side of the road. I stopped and found a custom fabricated manhole hook just lying there in the dirt. I threw it in the back of the truck, not knowing that hook was about to mark a new direction in my water treatment career. It's still on my truck and has the nickname Excalibur.

**Most challenging site I've worked on:** One summer, while working for my dad, I had a job to perform a site soils evaluation on a 982-acre piece of desert. It was 230 lots, most covered in thick patches of caliche. The job entailed the typical three-pit excavations (6 feet, 6 feet, 12 feet) per lot. It was three months working in the hot Arizona sun. I went through countless backhoe repairs, bucket teeth, truck tires, sunscreen, water and bug spray.

**Oops, I wish I could take this one back:** You have to be careful who you trust and pay attention to what's going on in your office. An office manager can misallocate a lot of money over time or neglect to send invoices or collect payments. If you just trust people to run the store without checking on them, they might succumb to greed. I was not responsible for hiring such an individual, but I did have to clean up the mess once. It's also important to get all agreements with customers, suppliers, subcontractors and employees in writing. Verbals, handshakes and trust don't hold up in court.

**The craziest question I've been asked by a customer:** “The buzzer kept going off so I pulled the wire off it, but the red light kept coming on until a week ago. It finally stopped coming on but now I have horrible sewage smells in the house and black water comes up in the shower. It goes away overnight. Is there something I should be doing, like adding enzymes to the septic tank?” We get two or three of these a year.

**If I could change one industry regulation, it would be:** If you own a grease trap, oil/water separator, sump system, septic tank, ATU, privately owned gravity sewer, lift station, force main or other appurtenance that treats or moves wastewater, then it should be mandated that you prove it is being operated on a regular schedule by a competent individual with training. Neglect of these systems and facilities can kill your system, harm people's health or poison the environment. Some people need to be educated, others need to be dragged kicking and screaming into compliance. It's sad that some folks need to be persuaded not to gamble with filthy conditions, and that some regulators don't enforce the rules.

**Best piece of small business advice I've heard:** My dad said, “Don't forget that public relations is a key part of this job.” This line of

thought encompasses so many things: Know what you're doing, be ethical, take pride in your work as if everything you do has your name on it, remain humble and don't talk down to people, if you make a mistake fix it, you represent not only yourself but the entire industry, keep your customers smiling and glad they called you, happy customers are word of mouth advertising and worth their weight in gold, if you don't have a servant heart you're in the wrong business, and be sure your employees embrace and personify all of this.

**If I wasn't working in the wastewater industry, I would:** Pursue fine art. I would paint, sculpt, create. That was my degree and prior calling and it still burns in me.

**Crystal ball time – This is my outlook for the wastewater industry:**

**Owners:** Some homeowners, developers and property management companies educate themselves and take to heart what service providers say. But many don't even know they have a privately owned wastewater treatment or collection facility, or what the permit requirements are. Or they've been told it's maintenance-free. My hope for the future is everyone would know roughly how their system works and what their legal obligations are, and that they need a well-trained operator.

**Regulators:** Some are not well-versed in their own rules and have trouble enforcing them as they don't want to appear overly burdensome to the public. Often these departments are short-staffed and under-funded. My hope for the future is regulators would strive to keep the rules current and easy to understand, systems and facilities would be well tracked and permits enforced.

**Service Providers:** Some don't have the proper training or certifications. Some have zero business ethics. Others keep throwing parts at a problem that could be easily fixed with simple maintenance on another part downstream. These operators put a bad face on the industry. In a perfect world, service providers would be required to pass an exam to become state certified operators and have ongoing training. **P**

- Compiled by Betty Dageforde

