





Dedicated to Cultivating the Community

A Profile of President Ruthann Manlet

By Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

RUTHANN MANLET, associate director of facilities management at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus, West Bank District, in Minneapolis, literally grew up in facilities management and at this institution: Her father worked at the University of Minnesota, including in the physical plant department.

When Manlet finished high school, her father encouraged her to join the university facilities management team and pursue a degree through a Regents Scholarship. She started at 18 as a buildings and grounds worker and was promoted to supervisor by age 30. Along the way, she earned her BA in business administration.

“I loved facilities management,” Manlet says. “It’s a career that many of us fall into and never leave. I fell in love with the level of care and commitment to serving people that facilities management professionals share. I enjoyed learning all aspects of facilities management, from administration to the day-to-day side that

our front lines deliver with consistency and quality.”

The work and the nature of the environment—and her colleagues—keep Manlet going. “With the everyday change of pace, no two days are alike,” she says. “It’s the collaboration and interaction with our staff and customers; the staff we work with who come from all walks of life and constantly encourage me to do better; the challenge of improving our campus to make it the best experience for everyone who walks through it—and knowing that I’m helping to create some of the best research in the world.”

EARLY INFLUENCES

Manlet calls her commitment to the people she serves her strongest asset, and credits her childhood for that. She learned to work with people by working in her family’s grocery stores. When her family moved to a small farm,

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Above: Manlet and student Adam Kostanecki enjoy the new community garden, a collaboration between students and FM.

Right: The UM West Bank Facilities Management leadership team.



she found that she also loved working on the land. “Watching what you planted and nurtured grow into something that you supplied for the family was incredibly rewarding,” she says.

Her first community was the Girl Scouts, which she says “taught me many life lessons and shaped me into the leader I am.” She later became a Girl Scout leader and “to this day, some of my girls still reach out to me.”

That involvement is typical of Manlet’s approach to leadership and connections. “We are all involved in different communities, based on our interests and passions,” she says. “I found it important to give back.”

THE APPA CONNECTION

Manlet found out about APPA from Becky Hines, Midwest APPA’s (MAPPA’s) first female president, whom she met at a Big Ten and Friends Building Services Administrators conference in Minnesota. “Becky and I held similar positions, and I found myself seeking her out for advice. I set a goal to follow in her footsteps as a leader.”

In 2005, Hines asked Manlet to join MAPPA’s board as Chair of Professional Development. “I had a passion for training and professional development, so I accepted the invitation,” she says. “She said it was time for change and that I could bring some new ideas and energy to the MAPPA board. I think that if you ask anyone, they would say I did that.”

Manlet quickly learned how incredible APPA was. “From the professionals to our business partners, everyone is willing to share and help you in any way,” she says. “You can pick up the phone at any time with a question, concern, or challenge, and someone has an idea or is willing to listen and guide you. The amount of knowledge and experience in APPA creates a think tank that makes facilities management the profession it is. I have had the opportunity to learn and grow from some incredible

leaders in our organization, and the APPA community has given me so many rich opportunities. The more I learned about the APPA community, the more I wanted to do. The more I became involved, the more I found myself blossoming. I find myself saying yes every time someone asks or an opportunity comes up.”

Being involved in APPA has contributed to gaining confidence and knowledge in her chosen profession and helped Manlet become a better leader. “I need to have a seat at the table, be at the right table, and be a vocal player at this table to help our industry, especially since every day we are being asked to do more with less and to be more effective,” she says.

MOVING ON UP

In her 34 years at the University of Minnesota, Manlet has moved through the ranks to her current role, earning recognition as a University Services Star Performer along the way. She also holds certificates in communications, supervision, project management, and human resources.

Being a strong leader is a core value. “I believe that part of my job responsibility is to lead a team that exhibits extraordinary skills with passion and dedication,” she says. “I will do whatever it takes to help my staff develop. I love being a mentor and sharing and teaching.”

Manlet enjoys being a presenter, coach, and trainer in all aspects of APPA and has served in several roles at the international level, including as a Supervisor’s Toolkit trainer, Mexico Initiative cochair, credentialing faculty, and Vice President for Professional Development. In MAPPAs, she has served in progressive leadership roles from committee member on up to president, including introducing MAPPAs’ mentorship program. She credits the MAPPAs region for its encouragement and engagement throughout her APPA journey.

Manlet’s honors include the MAPPAs and APPA President’s Awards, the Pacesetter Award, and recognition as a Credentialing Lead Facilitator. She is a Certified Educational Facilities Professional (CEFP), and at the recent APPA conference in Denver was honored with the Meritorious Service Award.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

Manlet illustrates her presidential theme of “Cultivating the Community” with lessons from one of her favorite activities—gardening. “Whether planting flowers or vegetables, we all benefit from getting our hands a little dirty, because our efforts will result in a beautiful visual

or delicious flavors,” she says. It is because APPA has “watered and fertilized” her, she says, that she has gained the confidence she has now. “I have blossomed more than I ever would have without this organization,” she adds, and aims to encourage similar growth among her colleagues.

Just as gardening requires picking the right spot, “facilities management professionals have to pick the right organization to customize what we need, and APPA can do that,” Manlet explains. “We have launched an online community platform, led by VP for Member and Community Engagement Tony Guerrero and his committee, where you can discuss what you need to develop and nurture yourself in the profession.”

Gardening also requires improving the soil, notes Manlet—and APPA can provide the “nutrients” to help its members grow. “Do you need to read a book, attend some professional development training, or find a mentor? APPA is there for you,” she says proudly.

Planting the seeds of success means “making a commitment to yourself about what you want or need from our organization,” she says. “With the help of VP for Information and Communications David Handwork and his committee, we can customize exactly what you need.”

Gardens thrive when they are watered properly, Manlet observes, commenting that “our VP for Professional Development Beth Clark and her committee have developed many opportunities to ‘water your needs,’ from the Supervisor’s Toolkit to the Institute for Facilities Management, the Leadership Academy, and our new Continuous Learning Series. Led by VP for Professional Affairs Dan Bollman and his committee, we also



Manlet with dayshift custodians.
From left: Terel Bridges, Abdiasis Shube,
Manlet, Luc Asuncion, and
Adanech Meskela.



Above: Manlet with U of M colleagues Ron Mapston and Greg Berger.

Right: Manlet receives recognition from Chris Kopach for her term as VP for Professional Development.



Photo by Rhonda Hole

Above: Manlet speaks to APPA members at the 2018 conference.



Photo by Rhonda Hole

‘cross-pollinate’ through more than 20 opportunities to work with related associations such as NACUBO, ASHRAE, and the Society of American Military Engineers.”

In the same way that mulch protects a garden, says Manlet, “APPA is there to support you and ensure that you are getting what you need. Under the direction of Chair of the Senior Representatives Ian Hadden and Vice Chair Luis Rocha, you can receive the support of our whole organization. These representatives are all seasoned APPA Board members and former presidents of our regions.”

In addition, says Manlet, “through APPA, you can see yourself develop and blossom.” Bringing along others and investing in APPA’s credentialing program helps members “bloom.”

It’s also true that including a variety of plants makes a garden thrive. Along these lines, Manlet is focused on “creating diverse environments where more people feel invited and welcomed into the group(s) in ways that are meaningful to us both,” she says. “We’re not trying to build community as a ‘one-off’ experience. We’re building a supportive infrastructure by using our growing technology presence to glean more relevant

information about our members—or non-members—so we can meet them where they are and pull them into this fantastic community. If we do it right, they will naturally want to join the association *and* become more engaged.”

Manlet’s vision of the university as a garden has more than just a personal connection for her: She supported the creation of a community garden on the West Bank of the campus that she says “ties what we are doing to the importance of growing or enriching a community.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSION

One important area for Manlet is, understandably, the role of women in both facilities management and APPA. As president, she aims to emphasize that women and minorities are welcome as equals. “I believe that APPA is ahead of the profession in this area and leading the way in understanding the importance of having a diverse workforce,” she says. “We have made strides, but we still have some frustrations. APPA continues to look at various ways to engage and grow a community that is inclusive to all.”

Manlet is committed to seeing APPA continue to support its diversity and inclusion efforts with all members and their orga-

nizations. “We lead by example at our international, regional, and chapter levels,” she says. “As leaders, we need to acknowledge the many identities that make us unique and amazing, and be willing to be open to learning and understanding. If we take the time to be interested, we will create an inclusive environment and cultivate a community in which we will grow and learn. As facilities management professionals, it is important that our organizations are also made up of diverse populations. This lets us meet the needs of our customers—staff, students, and visitors. We need to always be open to different viewpoints and beliefs. As we strive to add more people from different backgrounds, we will continue to bring more ideas and creativity to our profession. A diverse workforce will always make an organization stronger and richer.”

Manlet is humbled and honored to have been the third female president of MAPPAs and to become the fifth woman president of APPA, and has been inspired by her predecessors. “These incredible women—not only MAPPAs’s Becky Hines and APPA past presidents Mary Vosevich and Polly Pinney, but also APPA executive vice president Lander Medlin—have helped shape me and push myself to continue to grow and learn.”

She notes that “just as many strong men have encouraged me, challenged me, and supported me throughout my life, starting with my number-one supporter: my father. I have been fortunate to come across inspirational leaders who have been willing to teach and guide me. I believe it takes a community to be successful. No one truly succeeds unless everyone succeeds.”

HONING THE STRATEGIC EDGE

Manlet credits APPA’s Immediate Past President Don Guckert and the APPA Board of Directors for their dedication to and emphasis on APPA’s Strategic Plan. She will continue to focus on the plan during her presidency, because it relates not only to the future and stability of APPA, but to its profession, member institutions, and individual members.

“The opportunity for real-world conversations and experience with my APPA peers has given me knowledge to prepare for and be part of strategic planning at the university,” she says. “As I brought back what I learned from APPA’s professional development opportunities, it became evident that the University of Minnesota leadership—especially Bill Paulus, associate VP of facilities management, and Dave Hutton, senior director of district operations—relished this knowledge. We have brought



Manlet, center, discusses West Bank Student Union Skyway exterior resurfacing project with Sawyer Stecher of Loeffler Construction, left, and Karen Haakonson, right, U of M project manager.

APPA’s Supervisor’s Toolkit and Leadership Academy to our campus as part of our commitment to the development of our future leaders.”

Manlet sees APPA’s Strategic Plan, *Preparing for Every Future*, as the key to educating APPA members “so we can focus on cultivating our APPA community,” she says. “We know that changes in educational facilities management are happening simultaneously, exponentially, and interdependently while higher education is at a critical juncture. APPA leaders realize that the association must meet the demands for continuous learning and skill-building, which will be the core to the success of our members in serving the ever-changing needs and demands of our institutions. We will focus on enhancing the vision outlined in our strategic plan to create a future of continuous learning and strategic principles.”

BEYOND THE WORKDAY

There is more to Manlet than her rewarding campus career and extensive involvement with APPA. When she is not at work, she spends time with her family and gives back to her community. She enjoys volunteering with organizations like Special Olympics and Ventures Travel’s True Friends program, and credits her brother, who is intellectually disabled, for opening her eyes to this community. “I wanted to find a community that would embrace my brother as APPA had done for me.” These organizations and the people she has met through them “have fed my soul and filled me with energy.”

Manlet was especially moved that APPA supports her passion to help others. “In 2011, when the MAPPAs annual conference



Above: University of Minnesota West Bank Facilities Management 1st shift.



Left: West Bank 2nd shift.

was held in Minneapolis, my MAPPA/APPA community supported my other community by opening their hearts and contributing more than \$1,500 through a Hot Wheels charity race,” she recalls. “These funds gave some special needs travelers the adventure of a lifetime.”

Manlet also has worked in real estate and still holds a license, although she doesn’t sell real estate these days. “That experience contributed to my facilities management career by teaching me the importance of having great communication skills,” she says. “It is important to educate your facilities management customer about what our standards are and how our funding structure works. Real estate taught me that letting your customers, staff, and visitors know that you care will ring true throughout your career and pay big dividends. It is important to take the time to be an attentive listener.”

Her real estate work showed Manlet that “everyone’s time is im-

portant,” she says. “I practice this in my day-to-day life.” Her time in real estate has also taught her to hone her negotiation skills.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Facilities management goes beyond a mere “job” for Manlet. “In our profession, you never stop learning and growing. Every day is a new and exciting challenge, but knowing that I am having a positive influence on the staff, customers, and our world-class facility makes it all worth the effort,” she says. “I believe the folks in the FM profession and throughout APPA live this. It is exciting to me and is what has drawn me to—and kept me in—this incredible profession.” ☎

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