

# PAM WALASKI

## Incoming 2024-25 ASSP President

**When she's not helping organizations develop safety management systems or teaching university OSH courses, you might find Pam Walaski, CSP, FASSP, outdoors riding a bike, fishing or bird-watching. Her typical morning may start with coffee followed by a kayak ride to enjoy the tranquility of the area in which she lives.**

**"I think I've adjusted** to the peace and quiet," Walaski says. "Living in a city, it was very busy, lots of traffic, lots of activities. That was fun, but now I've come to appreciate the peace and quiet of living in a remote area, and I like the ability to be outdoors a lot."

Walaski was born and raised in the western Pennsylvania town of Braddock, known for its steel production. When she was about 5 years old, her parents moved their family of five to the suburbs of Pittsburgh, where Walaski lived until she left home for college, eventually settling in an urban neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Now, she is one of about a dozen year-round residents of Rimer, a village situated on the Allegheny River outside of Pittsburgh. In the summer, the village is a popular destination for summer travelers who enjoy boating, fishing or other water sports.

"When my husband was still alive, we bought this as a weekend property," she explains. "Then when my daughter finished high school, we moved up here full time, and I've been here almost 5 years now." Her daughter Chloe, now 23, lives in Pittsburgh and provides care for older people who need support. Walaski's son Jason, 25, lives in Washington, DC, where he works in the government contracting group of a business management consulting firm.

While she loves many outdoor activities, bike touring is one of her great passions. She has biked the Great Allegheny Passage, a rail trail that is part of a 335-mile route stretching from Pittsburgh, PA, to Washington, DC. Other rides have included the Erie Canalway Trail from Buffalo, NY, to Albany, NY.

"It's not just riding the bike for a couple of miles at a time over one day. I like to be gone for several days," Walaski says. She typically rides about 55 miles a day when bike touring, which she says is "pretty average" for people who enjoy that activity. "You get up early in the morning and hop on your bike, you stop when you see something of interest and typically get to where you're staying for the night around 2 or 3 o'clock. Take a nice shower, have a beer, put your feet up, go for dinner and just kind of relax, then get up and do it again the next day."

While she enjoys the exercise that riding provides, Walaski also relishes the opportunity to see interesting sights along the

way. "What I like about it is that you get to see so many small towns and historical places because most of these bike trails are either repurposed railroad routes built at the turn of the century or canal towpaths, which were used to move barges inland," she says.

### A Winding Path to Safety

Walaski's most recent role was with Specialty Technical Consultants Inc., an EHS consulting firm. She recently left that position to form her own consulting firm, RiverLure OSH Services, providing freelance support to other consulting firms. Like many OSH professionals, her path to safety was an indirect one. She started her career in social work, where she spent about 15 years after earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in that field, working primarily in county-level community services for developmentally disabled people in Pennsylvania.

"I did a lot of job-hopping," Walaski says about her social work career. "I would take a job and I would think, 'This isn't working' or I was just frustrated with the management." After leaving one job for another, Walaski says she would soon find herself in the same mindset.

"Finally, one day it dawned on me that it wasn't the organizations I was working for. It was me. It wasn't the right career. It wasn't what I wanted to be doing," she says. Walaski considered pursuing her dream of becoming a lawyer, but without the part-time or online options that exist today, going back to law school was not feasible.

She found that she could pursue a degree in environmental protection science part-time while continuing to work. After completing the program in 1995, Walaski began working for an environmental consulting firm, which introduced her to new and interesting experiences.

One of her first jobs was performing industrial hygiene sampling at a steel plant. Before starting the work, a company representative showed her around the site to understand the processes. "This was a coke plant, so they were burning coal and turning it into coke," she explains. "There were fires and noise and machines and all kinds of things. I remember walking around with the representative, and he said, 'Keep your head on a swivel.'"



**Pam Walaski**  
Pam Walaski, CSP, FASSP, is sole proprietor of RiverLure OSH Services, providing freelance support to other consulting firms, and teaches OSH courses at several universities across the country. She is an ASSP Fellow and has been a member since 2003. Walaski has been a presenter at ASSP's annual professional development conference every year since 2005. She has served on ASSP's Finance Committee and the Council on Professional Affairs. She has also served as administrator of the Consultants Practice Specialty and president of the Western Pennsylvania Chapter. She was a director-at-large on the ASSP Board of Directors from 2018 to 2021 before rejoining the board July 1, 2022.



As it was her first time in any kind of manufacturing environment, Walaski was amazed by the sights and sounds. “I’m sure my mouth was open because I had never seen that before,” she says. “Growing up with a father who worked in a bank and in my early career as a social worker, you don’t see those kinds of things. It was just so fascinating to me.”

After about a year, Walaski was assigned safety as an added responsibility to her role. “One of the principals pulled me into their office and said, ‘We want you to take over the safety program here for us,’” Walaski recalls. “And I said, ‘Why me? I don’t know anything about safety—that’s not my background.’ And they said, ‘You’re smart. You learn fast. We think you can do it.’ So, I picked safety up as a responsibility and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

For Walaski, it is difficult to point to one aspect of the safety profession she enjoys most. “The opportunities I have had to partner with workers to assist with harnessing their ability to solve issues that impact their work lives has got to be at the top,” she says. “While we may not often get to experience the impact directly, it is something I reflect on a lot after being in this profession for more than 30 years.”

## Getting Involved With ASSP

Walaski began taking safety courses to support her new responsibilities. The instructor of one such course, Fran Sehn, introduced himself as an ASSP member who was active with his chapter and invited participants to talk to him to learn more about joining or volunteering.

“I spoke with him during a break, and 6 weeks later I was the assistant program chair for the chapter,” Walaski recalls about getting started as an ASSP volunteer leader. The plan was to work with the program chair to learn the role, then take over the position when the chair’s term ended 6 months later.

“Shortly after that, the person couldn’t fulfill those responsibilities anymore, so they called me back and said, ‘Guess what? You’re now the program chair,’” Walaski explains. She held various roles within the chapter, eventually becoming president.

Walaski’s involvement in the practice specialties has a similar origin. When she joined the Consultants Practice Specialty, then-administrator Linda Tapp reached out to ask if Walaski would like to become

the assistant newsletter editor to learn what was involved so she could succeed the current newsletter editor, whose term would end 6 months later.

“Stop me if you’ve heard this story before,” Walaski says. “Six weeks after I took over as assistant newsletter editor, Linda called

me and said, ‘Guess what? That person can’t do that job anymore, so you’re now the newsletter editor.’”

But she does not regret a moment of her ASSP experience. In 2022, Walaski enjoyed a high point in her career when she was named an ASSP Fellow, the Society’s highest honor. “Many volunteer leaders are active in the Society, and a lot of what we do helps the Society function,” Walaski says. “But the focus of the Honor of Fellow is your contributions to the profession. I think that’s why it means so much to me. The articles I’ve written and other work I’ve done to advance the profession will live on after I’m no longer working or no longer alive.”

When asked about her advice for other safety professionals, Walaski’s answer is simple: Say yes. “Take advantage of the opportunities that are in front of you, both professionally and personally,” Walaski says. “That’s sort of my approach to life. When somebody offers me an opportunity or I see something that interests me, I tend to be the kind of person that goes for it and jumps in with both feet.

This mindset is what led Walaski to run for an elected position within ASSP. “At one point, I couldn’t see myself on the Board of Directors. But some of my colleagues encouraged me to think about it,” she says. She ran for and served as director-at-large from 2018 to 2021. “When I was elected, I said to myself, ‘That’s it. Once I do those 3 years, I’m not going to do any more.’ As I neared the end of that term, I started to think I might have a little bit more to give.” But things haven’t always gone her way. “I’ve lost two elections at the Society level, both to Jim Thornton,” she laughs. Despite some disappointments, Walaski was not discouraged, and she was eventually elected to serve as ASSP’s senior vice president, succeeding to president after 2 years.

Saying yes is also how she first began writing. After delivering a presentation at ASSP’s 2005 Professional Development Conference, Walaski remembers receiving a call from *Professional Safety* journal’s editor. “She said ‘I read your proceedings paper and I think this would make a good article for the journal. Would you be interested?’ And I said yes,” Walaski explains.

Since then, she has written several articles that have won awards, edited a book on consulting, served as section coordinator for the *Safety Professionals Handbook* along with authoring one of its chapters, and has even written her own book. “Saying yes to opportunities is the way I’ve gotten involved,” Walaski says, and recommends members welcome those opportunities. “Even if you’re not sure you want to, even if it’s outside your comfort zone, be willing to say yes,” she advises.

## Building a Community

Walaski will be the ninth woman to lead ASSP in its 113-year history. Her term as president will begin the first time the Society will have three consecutive female presidents (with Linda Tapp in 2025-26 and Monique Parker in 2026-27). Musing on this fact, Walaski says that perhaps female members understand the challenges of being a woman in a





Clockwise from top left: Friends and colleagues Deb Roy, Walaski, Kathy Seabrook and Linda Tapp. Walaski with her children, Chloe and Jason. ASSP's annual professional development conference has been a mainstay in Walaski's career for nearly 2 decades.

male-dominated profession such as safety. "Some of those challenges are very difficult work environments and often being the only woman in the room," Walaski says. "There aren't many women in the profession, and that's a challenge, even in a very welcoming organization. I think a lot of us have realized that and have wanted to give something back to other women. One way we can do that is to get involved and to participate at higher levels."



Walaski's involvement with ASSP helped her establish connections with several women who shaped her thinking and her professional life. "When I think about my career, I think about the people I've met and how those relationships have carried me through all those years," Walaski says. "I met Carol Keyes, Kathy Seabrook, Linda Tapp, Deb Roy and Fay Feeney just being involved with ASSP activities. We got to know each other, we became professional colleagues, and we've become friends."

While those key relationships developed organically, the important role they played in her career drove Walaski to try to create that experience for others in a more intentional way. She recalls a conversation with her friends and colleagues. "We were talking about our careers and what we thought would have helped us when we were in our mid-careers," Walaski says. The conversation sparked an idea for Walaski and the result was the creation of peer-to-peer mentoring groups to help women in OSH establish their role as leaders and take charge of their leadership path.

"These are professionals who are 5 to 8 years into their career and are looking at where they want to be in the future," she explains. "The idea is to create a cohort so they can get to know each other really well over the 8 months they spend together, and they can then use those relationships down the road as they work their way through their career."

### Leaving a Legacy

Perhaps the reason the peer mentoring project is so fulfilling is because it involves sharing knowledge

forward for future safety professionals. "I think that's a really important part of what we do, more so in our profession than many others because of the nature of the work we do," she says. "We have to work together. We have to share information. We have to help each other and provide tools and techniques and resources, whether it's a book or a presentation or whatever it is. We owe that to each other."

Walaski also sees helping others as a critical part of the growth of the safety profession. "Our profession is undergoing a tremendous evolution, and it's exciting," she says. "It's a little scary because of the changes, and we're rethinking concepts that we thought were golden rules that maybe aren't so much anymore. If we're willing to embrace the change and work with each other, it can help us as a profession to evolve and become a more valued part of our organizations."

For Walaski, her volunteer involvement and her professional life—and even her personal life—are inextricably tied together. "I often think about and reflect on this: If I hadn't joined ASSP I have no idea where I would be right now," she says. "The people I know who have been important to me in my career and who are also my friends—I don't know that I would have met the folks I've met or seen the things that I've seen or done the things that I've done. That's amazing to me." **PSJ**

### Cite this article

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