

lead (AIA) AR

Member Highlight: Steven Baker, AIA

The leadAR Membership Highlight is a new and ongoing opportunity for AIAAR members to hear from influential voices in their professional community. Every conversation yields helpful insights and inspiration as an AIAAR board member visits with a leader in the AIA membership who is working to make a positive impact. If you would like to nominate a "leadAR" to participate, please contact us at info@aiaar.org with your suggestion.

In August, Katherine Lashley, AIA of Fennell Purifoy Architects and AIAAR Associate Director met virtually with Steven Baker, AIA of Harrison French & Associates (HFA). Here they discuss the topic of mentoring.

Originally from Little Rock, Steven earned his Masters of Architecture at Tulane School of Architecture before moving to Bentonville in 2013. At HFA, he quickly earned his license and began leading project teams as a young professional. Outside of his work life, he volunteers with NWA Young Professionals Summit and Bentonville Public Art Advisory Committee, as well as serving as a board member with Ozark Mission Project and AIA AR.

Katherine: What kind of roles have you taken on within AIA and how long have you been active?

Steven: I've been a member of AIA Arkansas for 6 years. Once I was licensed, I started going to more events for the CEUs, and quickly became involved. This year I'm serving as the chair for the NW Section and in this capacity I also sit on the (AIA AR) board to represent our area. I haven't done a whole lot outside of that... at a regional or national level, yet!

Katherine: How did you become a mentorship leader with your firm?

Steve: When I started at HFA, they had recently changed the rules so you could test for the ARE while you were accumulating your (experience) hours. I wanted to do it quickly. And so I did in just under three years. Afterwards, there were a lot of other folks new to the firm and going thru that same licensure process. My focus and example of doing it quickly started my coaching them. I progressed into a leadership role in the company fairly quickly. So even though there's a lot of people in that five to seven year range, I'm at a different position in the firm. That has offered a unique perspective and opportunity to mentor and coach others that are in a similar duration of their career, but not at the same position.

"Mentorship is most valuable when you don't need it."

Katherine: It sounds like you fell into the mentorship position early in your career. There may be a lot of people now that are suited to be mentors, but they think "I would rather they ask somebody else that has more experience."

Steven: A mentor doesn't have to be the most senior person at the company that's been there for 20 years. Being a mentor just means that you can offer guidance or you're knowledgeable about something and that can come really at any level. Challenge the system a little!

Katherine: Did you have any mentors from your early career, or anything that really inspired you to be a mentor to others?

Steven: I definitely had a couple of mentors at HFA... from day one has been Dave Wilgus. I saw his leadership, his experience and everyone really had a high level of respect for him in the company. I sought him out as a mentor... like "Hey... how do I become you?"

Also, my leader in a couple of different roles at HFA, Bo Ebbrecht, has taught me a lot. As I worked under him for the first few years at the firm he was my go-to for "architect questions"! You know, "how would you detail this?", or "can you help me figure out... how to meet code?"... Those two have both been really good mentors for me but in very different capacities.

As far as what inspired me to be a mentor... Definitely having those two as an influence, but I think even more so is my mom... She was a teacher for 40 years and just seeing her – even though it was her career – it was her life-long passion and that has always inspired me to teach others or mentor them and help develop others around me.

Katherine: What does “mentoring” mean to you, and do you think the definition of “mentorship” is changing?

Steven: Mentoring to me means supporting and motivating. And to me, mentoring is in that sense, a sharing knowledge, or offering advice, helping people set goals for *themselves* or their career, and in leading by example.

As I mentioned earlier, I think I have challenged the system of what it means to be a mentor, or *who* can be a mentor. In our profession, there is a very different expectation of who can be a mentor. It’s really important to have that senior person perspective that can speak to long-term success in a profession. However, our industry has changed so quickly the last several years. Even the licensure process - the process or path to being an architect - has evolved. I feel like you almost have to have someone that has lived a more similar experience in the profession to also be a mentor to support and encourage you to get you thru the early developing stages of your career. Someone five to six years into their career may be a valuable mentor in some aspects.

Katherine: Do you have any specific strategies that you or your firm uses to teach and encourage mentees?

Steven: For me, the biggest thing in a true mentorship is that you have to be genuinely invested...it really is a relationship, and not just musing about your career or where you’ve found success. And I don’t think you can actually offer true support or help them set goals in their personal career path without first knowing them in a real way.

At HFA, we don’t try to force mentorship... We do introduce everyone that can be a mentor to those who may be looking for a mentor. And then we will facilitate some kind of initial introductions or conversations, but from there we really leave it up to the individuals. We do encourage mentees to choose someone outside their team because we want them to share different experiences. If you do choose to have a mentor within the company, we try to support that.

Katherine: When do you think mentorship is most valuable?

Steven: Mentorship is most valuable almost when you don’t need it. It’s important to have the on-going casual check-ins and conversations that you may get a piece of advice that you didn’t even know you were looking for.

Katherine: For someone looking for a mentor, what traits would you consider most important?

Steven: Well of course I look for someone knowledgeable, approachable, and willing to be a mentor. After that, find someone who will be honest and candid and that will offer a different perspective. I don’t want somebody that’s just going to tell me what I *want* to hear. I want a mentor that will tell me what I *need* to hear, sometimes.

Katherine: Do you have any advice from a mentor that has really stuck with you?

Steven: I’m definitely paraphrasing and summarizing a lot of conversations... this is really a theme of a lot of the mentoring conversations I’ve had but I’ve really been encouraged to always accept new challenges or opportunities, but know my limits. Push yourself, but know how far.

Katherine: Anything else to add to the conversation on mentorship?

Steven: I think it’s important. On some level, we all mentor on a daily basis. I don’t think there’s enough of it. Perhaps some are hesitant to seek mentors. It has been hugely beneficial to me and I don’t think I would be where I am in my career without it. I wish more people would find a mentor!