Celebrating Our Retiring Colleagues:

The People Behind AIST's Legacy



After years of working alongside one another, it is difficult to imagine AIST without the colleagues who have helped shape its culture, support its members and keep its mission moving forward. As six valuable staff members prepare to retire, they leave behind more than decades of experience; they leave a legacy of dedication, collaboration and institutional knowledge that has become integral to AIST.

The loss of that knowledge is significant, but so is the care they have taken to pass it on to the next generation.

"These dedicated professionals have served AIST exceptionally well. Each contributed in different ways, but all shared a commitment to our members, our mission and the success of the Association," said Ron Ashburn, executive director of AIST.

Their impact can be seen not only in the programs they helped build and the work they accomplished, but also in the relationships they formed and the colleagues they supported along the way. As we celebrate their retirements, we do so with gratitude for all they have given AIST and with the knowledge that their contributions will continue to shape the organization long after their final days in the office.

Congratulations to Gina Kosak, Natalie Thomas, Lori Wharrey, Ken Landau, Vicki Dean and Charlie Bender! On behalf of the entire AIST staff, we wish them the absolute best on this next chapter.

Gina Kosak

Web Development Administrator

32 Years at AIST ▪ Retired in October 2026



When the internet was still in its infancy, building a website meant starting from scratch, sometimes with little more than a text editor and a willingness to learn. In 1996, just two years after joining AIST's predecessor society, the Association of Iron & Steel Engineers (AISE), Gina Kosak took on the challenge of creating the organization's first website, laying the groundwork for a digital presence that would evolve alongside the industry.

At the time, web development tools were limited and HTML interfaces were still in their early stages. Armed with a copy of *HTML: The Definitive Guide* and the Notepad program, Kosak built the site herself. Larry Maloney, then AISE's executive director, did not fully understand what a website could offer, but he gave her the freedom to pursue the idea.

That trust became a defining feature of her career: the opportunity to take initiative, explore unfamiliar territory and develop skills that would help move the organization forward.

Over the decades, the workplace and the steel industry have changed considerably, including who has a seat at the table. When Kosak began in 1994, the professional environment was largely male-dominated, extending even to expectations around workplace attire.

"Never stop learning and never be afraid of change."

Women were expected to wear skirts and pantyhose, and there were no women in upper management.

Today, women are increasingly involved across all aspects of the industry, including executive leadership. Stacy Varmecky's rise to executive management at AIST marked an important milestone in that progress, reflecting a broader shift in opportunities for women throughout the organization.

For Kosak, that evolution is particularly meaningful because she experienced firsthand how much a supportive leader could influence a career. Maloney was the person who had the greatest impact on her professional development, pushing her past her comfort zone and giving her opportunities she might not otherwise have received in an industry where women were once underrepresented. He encouraged her to speak up, take on new challenges and develop her abilities, offering support even when she was still learning to believe in herself.

One of her favorite memories came during an AISTech in Nashville, when she sang with the country band. The experience offered a chance to step away from the usual responsibilities of work and enjoy the camaraderie that makes a long career memorable.

As she prepares for retirement, that balance between professional growth and personal connections lends her advice to the next generation. Technology will continue to change, she said, but the ability to adapt, solve problems, communicate effectively and build strong relationships will remain especially valuable.

Just as important, she advised, is enjoying the people and experiences along the way. In the end, the relationships and experiences built throughout a career can mean just as much as the work itself.

Natalie Thomas

Member Database Administrator

29 Years at AIST ▪ Will Retire in January 2027



"Take advantage of any opportunities that come to you"

When Natalie Thomas joined AISE in 1998 as a production assistant working on the magazine, the office still relied on fax machines, overhead projectors and even typewriters. Nearly three decades later, she is retiring as a member database administrator, having helped guide AIST through some of its most significant technological transitions.

Thomas's career has followed the evolution of workplace technology. While working in magazine production, she took night classes in systems administration, building the skills that would eventually open the door to a career in information technology (IT). The opportunity to move into the IT department marked the beginning of a professional journey that would see her take on increasingly complex projects and responsibilities.

Among her proudest accomplishments was upgrading an old DOS-based database to SQL before the merger of AISE and the Iron & Steel Society (ISS). Following the merger, she helped combine the two organizations' databases into a unified system for AIST. The work laid an important foundation for managing information across the newly combined organization.

Since then, Thomas has contributed to numerous major database upgrades, implementing new programs and processes while improving efficiency for both staff and members. Her work has helped support the systems that keep everyday operations running, from data management and payment processing to member interactions.

When Thomas began her career, business was conducted largely through telephone calls and letters sent by U.S. mail. Today, processes occur mostly online and through email.

Changes in server and workstation operating systems, software capabilities and various other digital tools have reshaped daily job functions across the office. For Thomas, the challenge has been not simply keeping pace with those developments but helping AIST adapt its systems to take advantage of them.

That ability to learn and evolve was especially important during one of her final major projects: moving AIST's database system to a cloud-based version. The upgrade required considerable hands-on learning late in her career, pushing her to master new technology while working through the complexities of the transition.

Working alongside Danielle Schleiden-Remley and Brad Schneider, Thomas helped bring the project to completion. It was stressful and time-consuming but ultimately rewarding.

Thomas credits much of her professional growth to the people who supported her along the way. She remembers the guidance and opportunities provided by Frank Fonner, Janet McConnell, Gerry Kane, Stacy Varmecky, Schleiden-Remley, Bill Patterson and Ron Ashburn. She also values the many colleagues who became friends throughout her time at AIST. Their support, combined with opportunities to take on new responsibilities, allowed her to move from magazine production into IT and ultimately into database administration.

That is the advice she hopes to pass on to the next generation: take advantage of opportunities to expand your skill set and find new ways to provide value to both yourself and your organization.

Retirement will bring a welcome opportunity to focus on pursuits beyond the workplace. Thomas is looking forward to traveling and spending more time with her family and friends. An outdoor enthusiast, she enjoys canoeing and kayaking, camping, hiking and skiing, and plans to explore more of the national parks across the U.S.

Lori Wharrey

Senior Board Services Administrator

26 Years at AIST ▪ Retired October 2026



"Remember your health, well-being and your family are the most important."

When Lori Wharrey joined ISS in 2001, the organization had about 28 to 30 staff members. Over the next 25 years, she witnessed growth in both the organization and its efforts to support the future of the steel industry. Among the accomplishments she is most proud of is playing a part in helping the AIST Foundation expand its programs and student outreach.

For Wharrey, the most rewarding part of that work was administering scholarships and grants, helping connect students with opportunities to pursue their education and explore careers in the steel industry. Looking back, she finds it remarkable to see how much those programs have grown over the years.

That growth reflects not only the expanding reach of the AIST Foundation, but also the dedication of the people behind its work. Wharrey credits Ron Ashburn with having the greatest influence on her career at AIST, pointing to his leadership, support and willingness to entrust her with independent responsibilities. She also learned from the many members of AIST's Board of Directors and AIST Foundation Board of Trustees, whose commitment to the organization left a lasting impression.

Among those who made a particular impact was 2012–2013 AIST President Kent Peaslee, who helped deepen her understanding of student outreach and the ways to encourage young people to take an interest in the steel industry. Along with the leaders who guided her, Wharrey remembers the many colleagues whose hard work, dedication and kindness made her career meaningful.

The workplace itself changed considerably during her tenure. The growth in AIST's staff stands out as a testament to what she believes makes the organization special: a place where people want to work and contribute. Yet, despite the changes and expansion, one aspect of her experience remained constant: there was always something new to do and to learn.

That variety kept her engaged throughout her 26 years with AIST. Rather than settling into a predictable routine, she found a career that continued to offer new responsibilities, experiences and opportunities to grow. "Never a dull moment!" she added.

As she enters retirement, Wharrey leaves with an appreciation for the work she has done, the people she has worked alongside and the students who stand to benefit from the Foundation's continued efforts. Her advice to those beginning their careers, however, extends beyond professional achievement. Work hard and find satisfaction in what you do, but never lose sight of what matters most. Health, well-being and family, she emphasizes, must come before work.

Ken Landau

Staff Engineer

20 Years at AIST ▪ Will Retire in January 2027



"Enjoy the ride!"

For Ken Landau, his career has never felt much like work. "It's corny, but being a part of AIST and helping our members has meant so much," he said. "When I'm asked about my job, I say that I don't have a job but a gig because it isn't work but something I enjoy doing."

That enthusiasm for the work and the people it serves has been a defining part of his time with AIST. Rather than measuring a career by titles or individual accomplishments, he takes pride in being part of an organization that supports its members and the broader steel industry.

That appreciation for people and relationships was shaped, in part, by an earlier chapter in his career. While working on the modernization of Bethlehem Steel's 68-inch hot strip mill in Sparrows Point, Md., USA, he spent two years alongside Chuck Lawrence, the site manager who became an important mentor. Lawrence taught him about the job, the steel industry and life itself, lessons that left a lasting impression.

The work also provided opportunities to take on unexpected responsibilities. While employed by a major steel mill original equipment manufacturer, Landau worked as an expeditor, visiting machine shops to verify the manufacturing progress of equipment engineered by the company. The role required keeping projects moving and ensuring that machinery was progressing as planned.

One project, the AK Rockport continuous pickling cold rolling mill and temper mill, brought an especially memorable challenge. When the project lead responsible for commissioning the temper mill was pulled from the site, Landau stepped in to take over. The team successfully completed commissioning, and the customer acceptance tests, turning an unexpected change in leadership into a successful project outcome.

The workplace itself has undergone its own transformation. When he began his career, office attire meant slacks and a tie. Eventually, dress-down Fridays brought jeans and tennis shoes into the office, while working from home, now a familiar arrangement in many workplaces, was once unheard of.

As retirement approaches, Landau's advice to the next generation is as straightforward as his approach to work: "Enjoy the ride!" It is a fitting sentiment for someone who found fulfillment not simply in completing projects or meeting responsibilities, but in the people encountered, the challenges overcome and the opportunity to contribute to an industry that has been such a significant part of his life.

Vicki Dean

Sales Administrator

9 Years at AIST ▪ Retired October 2026



“Take advantage of what AIST has to offer. You will not find a better place to work.”

For Vicki Dean, the success of the AISTech exposition floor is measured in more than the months of planning that go into it. It is measured in the satisfaction of exhibitors, the smooth execution of the show and the excitement of an industry coming together. After a year or more of preparation, the exposition’s three days seem to pass in an instant, but the feedback from exhibitors makes the work worthwhile.

That sense of accomplishment has been a defining part of Dean’s career at AIST, where she has seen technology transform the way the exposition is organized and how exhibitors navigate the process. The exhibitor service manual, exhibitor portal and AISTech website have all evolved to make participation easier and more effective.

Yet, even as the tools have changed, the importance of people and teamwork has remained constant. Dean credits Rebecca Smith as the person who has had the greatest influence on her career at AIST, describing her as a wealth of knowledge who is kind and always willing to help with any question or issue. That willingness to share knowledge and support colleagues reflects the collaborative environment Dean has come to value throughout her time with the organization.

One of the most memorable chapters of her career came with AISTech 2020: “the show that never happened.” After more than a year of preparation, she described the decision to cancel the exposition due to COVID-19 as heartbreaking. Rather than bringing the plans to fruition, Dean and her colleagues spent the next several months undoing the work that had gone into the event.

The following year brought a welcome change. When AISTech 2021 was moved to June, the smaller exposition marked a significant return for an industry eager to gather again. For Dean, it was the best show ever.

“We were back!” she recalled, recapturing the enthusiasm that made the event so memorable. After the disappointment of the previous year, seeing people together again made the hard work worthwhile.

As she enters retirement, Dean’s reflections extend beyond the work itself to the organization and colleagues who have shaped her experience. Having worked for other companies and in other areas, she found something distinctive at AIST: a workplace where accomplishments are recognized, employees receive training to build experience where they need it and colleagues stand behind one another.

Her advice to the next generation is to make the most of those opportunities and the support available to them through AIST.

Charlie Bender

Staff Engineer

9 Years at AIST ▪ Will Retire in March 2027



From developing groundbreaking bearing technology to helping bring AISTech to life, Charlie Bender's career has spanned the technical challenges, industry relationships and collaborative efforts that keep the steel industry moving forward. Across roles in manufacturing and association leadership, he has found fulfillment in solving difficult problems, serving others and contributing to work whose impact extends well beyond the shop floor.

During his eight years on the AIST staff, he joined the team responsible for producing AISTech's technical program, helping deliver one of the steel industry's premier technical conferences. He also worked closely with members through AIST's many Technology Committees, supporting the exchange of expertise and collaboration that help advance steelmaking technology.

His contributions to AIST were only one chapter in a career marked by technical achievement. Before joining the AIST staff, Bender was part of a three-person team that received AIST's 2007 Reliability Achievement Award, and he served as chair of the Plate Rolling Technology Committee. In his work supplying the steel industry and other heavy industries, he helped develop the world's first six-row sealed work roll bearing, as well as a 99-inch-diameter tunnel-boring bearing used in a project beneath Chicago, Ill., USA.

"Let hard work surprise you with the unexpected benefits."

Over the years, Bender has witnessed considerable changes in the industry. Globalization has transformed the supplier base, while the industry has continued to demonstrate remarkable resilience amid persistent competitive pressures. He remembers the bankruptcies of the 1980s and the subsequent development of additional greenfield steelmaking capacity.

His professional development was shaped just as much by the people he encountered along the way. Rick Schrama played a particularly important role, having mentored Bender, who describes himself as an introvert, to become a confident public speaker through AISE events. Others left their mark in different ways: Bill Albaugh through humor; Clay Spaulding, Bud Couch, Les Miller and Larry McPherson through lessons in work-life balance; Kevin Bort through his dedication to a cause; and Tim Burttram through an example of integrity: a word given is a word kept. Together, these mentors and colleagues helped shape Bender's understanding of leadership, professional relationships and the responsibilities that come with a career in the industry.

Some of Bender's most memorable experiences came in the field. He recalls a service project that kept him and two other dedicated employees working for more than 24 hours. He also remembers witnessing the first 24-inch cast at Nucor-Yamato Steel Co., an experience that offered a firsthand view of steelmaking history in the making.

Another milestone came before he turned 30, when he helped establish global standards alongside competing manufacturers for an industrywide product interchangeability standard. The achievement demonstrated how even competitors can work together to establish common practices that benefit an entire industry.

For Bender, however, professional accomplishments tell only part of the story. Above all, he is proud of helping his wife raise their two children. As he prepares for retirement, he leaves the next generation with advice grounded in his own experience: let hard work surprise you with its unexpected benefits. The rewards of dedication do not always arrive on a predictable schedule or in the form one might anticipate. ✦