

MSU alumnus moved from oil fields to boardroom

An MSU graduate is thriving in an industry he grew up in.

Westhope native Nathan Conway is the chief operating officer of Ward Williston Oil Company, a North Dakota oil and gas firm with corporate offices in Michigan.

Conway started in the business in North Dakota as a high school and college student, checking oil wells on weekends and over summers.

“The field experience early on in my life was paramount in helping kick-start my career,” he told *Connections*.

Conway studied accounting at Minot State, where professors Joan Houston and Jay Wahlund stood out.

“Classes were challenging, and the instructors forced me to think,” he recalled.

After graduating from MSU in 2001, Conway joined Ward Williston and quickly scampered up the corporate ladder. On the way, he earned an MBA from the University of Michigan in 2010.

“At times it was like drinking from a fire hose. It was difficult to balance work, college and life,” he said of his graduate experience.

As Ward Williston’s chief operating officer, Conway plans to expand the firm’s opportunities in western and north central North Dakota as well as open up the Michigan market.

Ward Williston is headquartered in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. Founded in 1952, it maintains operations in North Dakota and Michigan and has land holdings in Colorado.

The firm was a pioneer in the North Dakota oil and gas industry. It drilled the state’s second successful oil well in the early 1950s. It was also a pioneer in the oilfield services sector, which provided services to other companies working in the area.

Conway believes the American oil and gas industry must reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

“We need to produce as much oil from the United States as possible rather than import oil from the Middle East,” he said. “By producing oil in the United States, no one will have fought over it, no one will have died over it, and we will no longer be supporting countries that do not like us.”

Improving technologies will enable the industry to explore untouched formations while reducing its carbon footprint, he added.

Because of its chronic boom-and-bust cycle, the oil and gas industry has been left with an aging workforce. Conway believes that MSU’s new energy economics and finance major will help to correct this imbalance.

“I am delighted to know that MSU was willing to teach the next generation of business leaders in this industry,” the 34-year-old said.

Conway is active in both the professional and local communities. He is a member of the Independent Petroleum Association of America and is on the board of directors of the North Dakota Petroleum Council.

Last August, Conway served as the chairman of the Golf for the Gulf event held at the Minot Country Club to help raise funds for families and workers affected by the 2010 Gulf oil spill.

He is active in a variety of domestic and international non-profit organizations and devotes much of his time and funds to help feed starving children in Africa through the humanitarian organization, JAM International.

Conway’s brothers, Robbie and Randy, also attended Minot State University.

— FRANK McCAHILL

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