

JIM THORNTON Incoming 2023-24 ASSP President

With more than 50 years of experience in workplace safety, James (Jim) R. Thornton, CSP, CIH, FASSP, FAIHA, values the time he has spent learning alongside experts in the field. While his journey in OSH began in a small town in Alabama, Thornton has big ideas on how to improve safety in the workplace.



James R. Thornton

James R. Thornton, CSP, CIH, FASSP, FAIHA, is the retired director of EH&S at Huntington Ingalls Industries. Thornton holds a B.S. in Aerospace Engineering from Auburn University and an M.S. in Industrial Hygiene from Texas A&M University. He served as chair of the OSHA Maritime Advisory Committee for Safety and Health and is a recipient of the U.S. Department of Labor Distinguished Service Impact Award for his work with OSHA. He serves as chair of the Virginia Manufacturer's Association's Safety, Health and Environmental Committee, and chair of the Virginia Peninsula Chapter for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Thornton is a Fellow of ASSP and AIHA.

Jim Thornton was born in Sheffield, AL, sometimes called “the City of Senators” for being the birthplace of three U.S. senators. With an aerospace engineering degree in hand, he graduated from Auburn University with dreams of joining the space program. “I was always fascinated with airplanes, rocket ships and things of that nature,” Thornton says. “President Kennedy said, ‘We choose to go to the moon,’ and I wanted to be a part of that.”

Thornton’s dreams seemed about to come true when he was offered a job in Tennessee using his aerospace engineering degree. But while on active duty in the National Guard, the nation’s space program stalled and the offer was rescinded.

After his dreams of heading to space were grounded, Thornton set his sights closer to home. “Donna and I had just gotten married, and I developed an eating habit that I couldn’t figure out how to break,” he jokes. He accepted a job at the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as an industrial hygiene technician. “I read the job description, but I didn’t know what that was. I thought I could clean up the bathrooms and hallways as good as anybody,” he laughs.

His first assignment was to accompany an industrial hygienist to Raccoon Mountain, a pumped-storage project on the Tennessee River. “TVA took a huge mountain and drilled a vertical shaft straight down 1,000 ft,” he explains. The project involved blasting a 33-ft diameter tunnel through solid rock. The workers were sent out during blasting. Thornton was tasked with testing whether the atmosphere was safe for the workers to reenter. “It didn’t take me long to figure out I was on the wrong end of the clipboard,” he says. “That’s what drove me back to graduate school.”

Thornton’s trip to Raccoon Mountain ignited a passion for worker safety. “I knew that because of my actions and measurements, I could make a difference and make sure people could go home the same way they came.” He reflects on how his background influenced his care for others. “Being from a pretty impoverished area of Alabama, I saw where a lack of access to medical care and safety generally led to people living shorter lives,” he says. “I felt a sense of the importance of giving back and using what I’ve been trained to do to help people. That’s carried me through my career, my day job and volunteer work as well.”

Thornton and his wife moved to College Station, TX, so he could pursue a master’s degree in industrial hygiene from Texas A&M University. They lived in married student housing and Donna worked at

a grocery store. “We were as poor as church mice and everything we owned we towed in the back of a rented van,” Thornton reminisces. “But it was a very enjoyable experience.”

Starting Out

After graduate school, Thornton returned to work as an industrial hygienist at TVA, recommending control measures for hazards and developing a computer-based storage and retrieval system for environmental and health data. Thornton eventually landed in Raleigh, NC. “I took a job with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) where I was doing research for the NIOSH criteria documents,” Thornton says. “It was an office job.” Although he found the work fascinating, he found himself called to something more hands on. As Thornton says, “I’m an outside kind of guy.”

Beyond practicing safety, Thornton wanted to inspire the next generation with his passion for protecting people at work. He began teaching safety at Thomas Nelson Community College and Old Dominion University. “I found it very rewarding to teach young people not only what the textbook says, but also how life works and how to get things done,” he says. “I really value the importance of education and I enjoyed doing that.”

Shortly after the birth of daughter Ragan, Thornton answered a job listing, a “two-liner in the Sunday paper,” and he began working at Newport News Shipbuilding. Throughout his 40-year career at the company, he served as manager of industrial hygiene; manager of health, safety and environment; and director of environmental health and safety. “I needed to know more about boots-on-the-ground safety and, fortunately, the shipyard is located in the Hampton Roads Harbor where the Navy has a strong presence.”

It was at this time that he became interested in the larger safety community. “I got involved in a local ASSP chapter to connect with professionals like me,” he says. “I learned from them. We shared stories of what worked and what didn’t work. I became really involved with ASSP and learned from it.” This jump-started Thornton’s involvement with the Society on a larger scale. “I started in the trenches and worked my way up to the Society office.”

Moments of Pride

During his time at Newport News Shipbuilding, Thornton worked hard to establish safety for the workers he saw on the ground every day. One of his

proudest moments was helping the facility earn the OSHA Voluntary Protection Programs Star status in the mid-1990s. “When we got the Star, it was just a beautiful, beautiful moment,” he says. “We were the largest in the U.S. at that time with about 30,000 workers. So, it was a big deal. And that really put our program on the map.” This achievement provided an opportunity to share safety with other companies. “We had visitors from Japan and China and other industries throughout the U.S. that would come and visit and say, ‘How do you do this stuff?’ and I’m really proud of that.”

Another accomplishment that Thornton holds dear is establishing a primary healthcare center for the shipyard workers and their families. Thornton explains that many of the workers were from North Carolina, riding buses to and from work for several hours each day. And because many do not have a primary care provider or a relationship with a physician, Thornton says that “in many cases, workers’ compensation becomes their go-to medical care. Many workers come to work with preexisting conditions and don’t have time to take care of themselves.”

Thornton and his team worked to create a better system for workers to receive healthcare. “Across the street from the shipyard, we constructed a beautiful, three-story health center, fully staffed with doctors, nurses, X-ray machines—a little hospital,” he says. “All medical treatments cost \$10, no matter the injury or illness.” After 6 years in operation, Thornton still checks in on the program’s progress. “Seeing what difference that has made—the delivery of primary care to people who didn’t really have any—what can that do to injury in the illness rates now that people are healthier? It is a unique project that I think will provide sustained healthcare.”

His career may have taken a different path, having at one point been considered as a potential candidate to lead OSHA. “It was tantalizing,” Thornton admits. “It was an honor. I mean, coming from a small town in Alabama, I was caught up in that for a while.”

Thornton recognizes the benefits of treating the agency as a partner. Working for a large maritime employer, he hosted many government safety officials on the decks of aircraft carriers. “I had John Howard from NIOSH looking at some of our ergonomic programs and the tools that workers had fashioned for themselves,” Thornton says. “He was like a kid in a candy shop. He’d call his aides over and say, ‘Look at this! Look at that!’”

Thornton saw these opportunities as mutually beneficial. “I understood the importance of a good relationship with a working partner, and they value it as well,” he says. “OSHA and safety and health programs have the same goal: They want people to go home in the same way they came,” he says.

Another source of pride for Thornton is his work as chair of the Maritime Advisory Committee for OSHA from 2003 to 2016 helping to develop “standards that were good, fair and responsible—protective of people, yet manageable,” he says. The

bottom line is that both federal and state OSHA are valuable assets. “You just need to recognize their role and value them as a partner, and everything will work out,” he says.

Making the Business Case for Safety

For Thornton, making a business case for safety was integral to the process of enacting major changes. “Because I had workers’ compensation responsibility, I knew what the bills were. I looked at the cost of occupational injuries and illnesses, and it was a staggering amount of money,” Thornton says. “I worked hard at putting together data to demonstrate what the outcome of investing heavily in safety and health programming would be in terms of dollars.” After collecting that data, Thornton would meet with executives and lay the groundwork for why the organization should invest in safety. “I basically sold it on the basis of money,” he says.

Connecting with leaders is another proactive way to make a business case for safety. “Employers have a duty to provide their employees with a safe and healthy environment. I’ve never met a senior manager who doesn’t get that,” he says. This allowed Thornton to make the argument that not only is it the right thing to do, but a company should also want to invest in its own image. “You want to stay out of headlines. A fatality can wreck the reputation of a company.”

To gain the soft skills needed to have these difficult conversations, Thornton worked on learning as much as he could. “You have to understand how to speak the language of management and business,” he says. To do that, Thornton read a lot of books and articles, and attended conferences to help find the balance between information and emotional appeal. “I could take complex data and make something out of it. I would always communicate with my audience, whether I was meeting with someone in finance or human resources,” he says. Thornton says it is important to hone these soft skills and learn how to advance safety on behalf of workers. “How do I take this and package and sell it? It’s marketing. And marketing is not a dirty word. It’s a necessary word.”

Thornton recognizes the role of education and communication in efforts to connect with the C-suite and workers alike. “I’ve often said, safety begins when the supervisor turns his back on the job,” Thornton says. “As long as the supervisor is standing there, everybody is going to wear their hard hat. The moment they turn their back, what happens? Do they still wear their hard hat? Or do they say, ‘Thank goodness, they’re going back to the office. Okay, everyone, it’s business as usual?’” he explains. “I think that is a good barometer of safety. I’ve often gone into places that I’ve never been in and am asked to talk to the management team. They’ve said, ‘We have



Top: Thornton with Thorne Auchter (then OSHA administrator) touring the shipbuilding facility during construction of the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier in 1982. **Bottom:** Thornton hosting Charles Jeffress, then-OSHA administrator, on a tour of Nimitz-class aircraft carriers in for repair in 2000.



From top: Thornton enjoys outdoor activities. "I'm an outside kind of guy," he says. The Thorntons in 1976 and today.

safety problems. Can you come in and talk to—put your ear to the ground for a day and see what's happening?" But they want to keep me in the conference room and throw some charts on the board."

However, Thornton finds that he can get more insight by speaking to workers directly. "I'll say, 'After lunch, let's go down on the line and look around.'" He shares, "I will ask a group of workers one question: 'Do they care about your safety here?' The answers usually reveal all I need to know." Despite the simplicity of the question, Thornton says "you can learn more from that question than you can with all the surveys." He adds, "Just talk to people. It's about communication. It's about education. It's about listening."

The Year Ahead

Looking at his upcoming presidency, Thornton is excited about ASSP's continued focus on diversity, equity and inclusion. "I loved sitting in on the DEI Summit and listening to people talk," he says. "You can learn a lot if you listen."

Thornton also recognizes the opportunity presented by the collective experience of the past few years and how it has raised awareness of the OSH profession. "COVID-19 has taught us some good and some bad lessons. We should take advantage of lessons learned and shape the new normal in the safety and health profession."

He also is hopeful that the Society's programming can ultimately help to positively influence the reduction of worker injuries and fatalities. "I would like us to never lose sight of the fact that in round numbers, 15 or 20 people a day are dying on the job, and that hundreds of thousands of people are injured or made ill," Thornton says. By supporting OSH professionals through its education programs, standards and advocacy, he believes ASSP can help to move the needle. "By harnessing our strategic plan, if we execute those elements well, in the end, will help people go home safely at the end of the day."

Time With Family

While Thornton's résumé reflects changing jobs and responsibilities throughout the years, one constant has been his wife, Donna. "We've been married 52 years—and that's continuous service, by the way," he says. The Thorntons were childhood sweethearts who grew up only three blocks apart. Their romance blossomed in their high school hallways. "She would

write me these little love notes and stick them in my locker, and I'd write notes and leave them in her locker," he says. "It was meant to be."

His key to a successful marriage? "Never go to bed angry," he advises. "That's the secret. Work it out whatever it is. I think marriage is like a garden. You work it. You till it. You fertilize it. Some weeds grow in there sometimes. And in the end, you get a beautiful harvest."

The Thorntons' daughter, Ragan, has three children, Tatum, Ayden and Henley. Thornton reflects on his 12-hour days, weekend calls and work travel that kept him from spending as much time as he wanted with his daughter. "When I was working, I was working really hard," Thornton reflects. "Now, I do everything with my family," he says. "Grandkids are made for grandparents."

A favorite outing for the entire family is visiting the Busch Gardens Williamsburg amusement park, although Thornton is no daredevil. "I don't like heights, so I won't ride the coasters. But I'll hold the coats and cotton candy," he says. The pool at his house is another favorite summer destination for his grandchildren. "We'll cook some hot dogs; nothing exotic, just hanging out."

A Soft Spot

Thornton has been an animal lover his entire life. When his daughter was young, his house was home to many beloved pets, including hamsters, dogs, cats, horses, ponies, rabbits and a canary named Skyler. "I've always had a soft spot in my heart," he says. "I cannot watch those TV advertisements with the dogs in the snow and Sarah McLachlin singing. I can't take it."

He became involved with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, eventually serving as chair of the local chapter for many years. The organization helps find homes for surrendered animals, and educates underserved communities on responsible pet care, focusing on spaying and neutering efforts. He views this from an engineering perspective, "Fix the problem upstream—you can't fix it downstream."

With retired life comes the opportunity to focus on hobbies. Thornton takes the same approach of getting his hands dirty in his downtime that he did during his career, personally tackling home renovation and landscaping projects. "I have about 4 acres," he says. "I have a couple of tractors and those are like toys. I like digging holes and I like planting. I like landscaping and building things." His next project is building a greenhouse.

There is a sense of wonder that planting inspires in Thornton. "I love propagating plants," he says. "I like cuttings, I like to grow from seed. How can something so tiny grow to be something big and produce fruit? That's a miracle." **PSJ**

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