

RON CHRISTIAN

Volunteer of the Year

By Tom Schuman

Moving from the high school classrooms of Boonville to the nearby coal mines of southwestern Indiana was a possibility that Ron Christian considered “pretty appealing” at the time. Instead, Christian embarked on a successful legal career before eventually returning “home” 20 years later in a leadership position with Vectren, one of Indiana’s five investor-owned utilities.

The route was not a straightforward one. Following undergraduate work at the University of Evansville and law school at the University of Louisville, Christian explains:

“I wanted to be a real estate lawyer in 1982. The economy wasn’t very strong, and I had interviewed with a number of large firms around the country,” he recalls. “At Barnes & Thornburg in Indianapolis, the sole associate in the utility group decided she wanted to be an environmental lawyer. This was literally the week I was interviewing. They sort of on the spot said, ‘Would you like to come work with us and be a utility lawyer.’ I was not having tremendous success finding work, and it was a wonderful law firm and a great opportunity. So I did it, and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

Fast forward about 17 years and Christian was a vice president and general counsel at Michigan Consolidated Gas Company in Detroit. The merger of the holding companies for Indiana Gas Co. and Southern Indiana Gas & Electric Co. created Vectren, with the new company to be headquartered in Evansville.

“We had worked on that (the consolidation, when Christian had been at Indiana Energy) two or three times over a period of several years but could never get it done,” he says. “Niel Ellerbrook (Vectren chairman and CEO who had been in charge at Indiana Energy) encouraged me to come back.”

Multi-faceted role

Asked if he expected to end up working near his hometown, Christian exclaims, “Absolutely not.” As executive vice president, chief legal and external affairs officer, he has responsibility in the areas of legal, regulatory, gas supply group, insurance/risk management, sustainability, company foundation and more. He goes on to describe his attraction to the industry.

“In my case, the thing that I’m really fortunate to experience is that I get to work with so many smart people – accountants, economists, engineers, marketing professionals. The dollars are generally big. If you look at the amount of money spent in this state alone on energy, it’s

Chamber participation for Ron Christian includes an *Indiana Vision 2025* forum (left) and a *Connect & Collaborate* luncheon focused on workforce development that was hosted by Vectren this summer.



phenomenal. The impact to the economy is substantial.

“With every political administration, particularly at the federal level, there is significant change,” Christian continues. “Look at the way the Bush (George W.) administration dealt with environmental issues and contrast that with the Obama administration. We’re constantly trying to anticipate what’s going to happen and react. We have a small electric company relatively speaking but, even in our case, it can involve the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars. Once you make that investment, it’s irreversible. You’re hoping to utilize that for a period of 20 to 30 years.”

Vectren’s energy delivery subsidiaries provide gas and/or electricity to more than one million customers in Indiana and west central Ohio. Its nonutility group includes infrastructure and energy delivery services, coal mining and energy marketing. Regulations, at both the state and federal levels, play a critical role.

“It is a balancing act. In respect to rate regulation, the Utility Regulatory Commission has to be the arbiter,” Christian shares. “They’re the surrogate for competition because we don’t have competition on the electric side; we think the gas business is competitive. They have to make sure whatever we do is reasonable and appropriate. At the same time, they have to not be so restrictive that we’re unable to raise capital on reasonable terms and conditions because we spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year in infrastructure.”

Christian terms the Indiana regulatory climate as “constructive” no matter which political party is in power. “We’re not always happy with the outcome, but if we were it would probably be tilted too much in our favor. Our philosophy as a company is to be very transparent about how we conduct our business. We’re in the coal business; we sell coal to ourselves. All of that is subject to pervasive regulatory oversight. We were concerned about the supply of coal at reasonable prices, so we created 900 jobs (through Vectren Fuels, Inc.) in the state of Indiana.”

Working together

The missions of Vectren and the Indiana Chamber are closely aligned. Executives of the company, and its predecessors, have assumed volunteer leadership roles for many years. Christian has been involved as a member of the board of directors and on the energy and economic development policy committees. He was part of the 24-person task force that created the *Indiana Vision 2025* plan and was elected to the organization’s executive committee in 2012.

“Our (Chamber) mission, long term, is to make the state a better place to live and work. Our business, the utility business, is like a university or a hospital. We’re here as long as the state is here. Our interests, and the interests represented by the Chamber, are absolutely intertwined. Personally, it’s been a very rewarding experience to not only interact with the entire team here but all the business people who are involved.”

Vince Griffin, vice president of energy and environmental policy for the Chamber, has worked with Christian on a variety of issues.

“Ron is a passionate advocate on a number of topics that impact the energy industry, but also someone who listens to all



Christian says he highly values the colleagues he works with at Vectren, which he has called home for the past 13 years.

sides of the debate and considers all points of view,” Griffin says. “He has not only made many valuable contributions to our policy committee work, but also to the broader work of the Chamber.”

Christian called it a unique opportunity to help formulate the *Indiana Vision 2025* plan, learning from subject matter experts at each monthly meeting before ultimately prioritizing the elements to be included in the plan.

“I look back at the vision (*Economic Vision 2010*) that preceded it; Niel (Ellerbrook) was on that group. I look at the scorecard and what was accomplished,” he adds. “And the goals that were set this time, I think in order for the state to remain successful, we’re going to have to hit on all those things.”

One issue, moving closer to reality after many years of effort, that the Chamber and southwestern Indiana leaders collaborated on is the extension of Interstate 69. Currently most people in Evansville “connect themselves with St. Louis or Louisville because there is really no good way to get here (Indianapolis). If you look at folks in Fort Wayne, I suspect they’re in Indianapolis a heck of a lot more than folks in Evansville because it’s an easy ride. We’ve just truly been isolated.”

Christian also talks to others in the Evansville area about why they should consider Chamber membership. What is his message?

“From a value proposition, you can’t find better resources in terms of human resources, environmental information,” he offers. “The Chamber provides very cost-effective training opportunities. You also can’t find better representation on business issues. There’s no better value for a company than participation in the Chamber.”