





Eyes on the Future

SFNet Welcomes its Youngest President in 80 Years

BY EILEEN WUBBE

Robert Meyers, managing member and president of Republic Business Credit, discusses his over 10 years of SFNet involvement to where he is today, as well as his goals as SFNet's incoming president, which include creating a larger and more inclusive community to benefit its members and accelerate access to those in need of capital.

Please provide our readers with some background on your involvement with SFNet over the years.

My first active SFNet volunteer memory was helping Terry Keating, CEO of Access Capital, co-chair a Midwest Chapter education event in 2013 with the various asset-based lending group heads in the Chicago area. As they say, “no good deed goes unpunished.” The following year, Amanda Roberts of RedRidge and Jim Low of Wintrust Business Credit, asked me to be the treasurer of the Secured Finance Network’s Midwest Chapter. I don’t think I fully appreciated at the time that once you say ‘yes’ to the first post, it was actually a four-year commitment, however, I would do it again in a heartbeat as it ended up being a really fun ride with an amazing group.

The Chapter vice president role then followed, and I became the Midwest Chapter president in 2016. In addition to supporting the launch of the Chapter’s Women in Secured Finance Group, we massively increased the number of volunteers, committees and sponsorship. With more engagement across our community, we launched quarterly leadership meetings to build on our momentum. Thanks to the efforts of those 30 or 40 people, combined with all the amazing volunteers that followed, it is one of the largest and most vibrant SFNet chapters.

But, in true SFNet fashion, the ink wasn’t even dry on my Chapter president year when I got a call from the incoming SFNet national president, Andrea Petro, who at the time was running Wells Fargo’s Lender Finance group, and said the Board was updating its governance and wanted to chart a new course for the future of the Secured Finance Network. As is common with many organizations, we needed clearer roles and expectations for our volunteers to be successful. SFNet wanted to move to a 14-person Executive Committee with each having a specific purpose while representing one of the various constituencies of our community. They wanted me to launch the Association’s national Young Professionals group, building upon the great success we had seen in the Chapters’ young professional-focused programming, which today is referred to as Emerging Leaders.

Our first national conference for young professionals had around 100 people attend from across the country, known as the YoPro Leadership Summit, held in 2018 at Winston & Strawn in Chicago. The second year it had more than 150 people in attendance. We’ve continued to hold the Summit across the country, and it is now called the Emerging Leaders Summit. I’m excited that we’re going to be having one in Boston in spring 2025. The best sign of a healthy organization is having the right group of leaders and volunteers gathered together for a common purpose. The founding principle of stewardship is leaving things better for the next generation of leaders. Kat Parker, director of Business Development at HYPERAMS LLC and Will Bence, managing director of Wingspire, both have served as chairs of the YoPro Committee and it is so cool to see what the group has done. It surpassed all of our expectations and clearly has real staying power,

continuing to thrive as it moves around the country. Attendance continues to grow, and it provides an opportunity for people to get involved as a sponsor, panelist, attendee or a volunteer. For many, it is their first experience with our community.

After three years as chair of the YoPro Committee, I was asked to chair the SFNet Annual Convention in New Orleans in 2020. Everyone first imagined an opening reception at the World War II Museum or Preservation Hall with live music and second-line bands, however, despite our early plans, none of those options were available to us due to the pandemic, and we completely pivoted to a virtual event with more than 2,000 attendees. It wasn’t as good as getting together in person, of course, but I think we absolutely made the most of it, and we had a lot of first-time convention attendees, cameo appearances and video interludes as well as about 40 different panels. The ability to include so many people was the best part of the 2020 virtual convention and why we continue to provide virtual engagement opportunities to supplement our in-person programming when it makes sense. It became more approachable and more inclusive, giving people an opportunity to get involved or experience it, to laugh, meet new people, and build business connections.

The final two years of my six years on the Executive Committee were spent leading the SFNet’s Entrepreneurial Finance Committee, which helps plan a conference for 50-60 presidents and CEOs around the country to get together and talk about the challenges and opportunities facing our independent finance community.

How has your involvement in SFNet impacted you professionally and personally?

I think a lot of perspective depends on your expectations when you start something. I was lucky to have recently acquired Republic Business Credit before I joined the Executive Committee in 2016, so I had the full support of our incredible team and it joined with Republic’s strategy to bring our platform national. I consider myself very fortunate. Many people would call me crazy for buying a finance company at 32 years old, but my whole perspective has been that we can build something better, together, and create an opportunity for everyone to be successful. I had so much help along the way, whether it was a phone call or an introduction or shared experiences across our community of both successes and, more importantly, failures. Looking back professionally, one of the largest impacts has been the SFNet community of mentors, coaches, friends and caring people, and they appreciate that I’m giving back to our trade association as our way of paying it forward to the next generation.

SFNet’s outgoing president, Barry Bobrow, does large syndication deals for some of the largest banks in the world, and Republic Business Credit focuses on the lower middle market. In the finance world our paths would not have crossed without our mutual desire to pay it forward through the

Secured Finance Network. The things Barry thinks about day to day, macroeconomic, big picture challenges, are significantly different than what one of our non-bank entrepreneurs might think about. So, for us, I think it is this cohort and community that the SFNet brings us all together and, more importantly, creates an opportunity for conversations that would otherwise not happen and empowers us to focus on the needs of all of our members.

Of course, you meet might meet someone by happenstance at one of our events, but I argue you will form a stronger relationship when you're volunteering together as you get an opportunity to see the work product, dedication, and passion that someone brings without it necessarily being tied to a specific deal or transaction.

You have participated in SFNet's mentoring program in the past. What role has mentoring played in your career?

SFNet is now on its fourth iteration of its mentoring program, which is presented by the Secured Finance Foundation and the SFNet Inclusiveness Committee. There are 120 mentors and mentees in the program for 2024. The mentors are incredible leaders who want to give back and help our next generation. So far, I have been a mentor twice. What is even more enjoyable is that several of our team at Republic have been mentors and we've had at least one mentee in all four of the programs.

Life provides an interesting journey if you will let it. I graduated from the University of Chicago with a really applicable biology degree, studied for the MCAT as my desire was to be a surgeon, however, at the time I thought it would be best to work for a few years prior to making that type of life-long commitment. When I joined the finance and factoring industry, I didn't have a clue, so I have really been a lifelong learner in our industry. I've had about 10 to 15 mentors in my time, some formal mentoring structures, others informal, but all of them were there to help fill in my gaps. When we bought Republic Business Credit in 2016, I intentionally reached out to several people who bought and sold independent finance companies and a few in the banking community to say hello and ask them to sit down with me for 30 minutes to pick their brain. Many of these relationships have continued and have turned into friendships and golf foursomes. In September, I was golfing with Mike Sharkey who is a past SFNet president, as an example of people who were always willing to help along the way.

I fondly remember one of my first SFNet networking events. Rick Barfield, who seemed to know everyone, was one of the first people to make me feel welcome. At my first event, he walked me around and introduced me to a hundred people. That one act of kindness made the room far more comfortable, and now I aim to do the same thing for others.

Without mentorship I wouldn't be here, or certainly wouldn't be on the SFNet Management Committee and wouldn't have



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the honor and privilege to be the president of our industry trade association. I will be the youngest president ever of our association and, not that age matters, but that doesn't happen at this stage of life without so many people who helped along the way. I'm thankful for them, and I hope they smile when they see my photo on a whole bunch of magazines that it doesn't deserve to be on.

I think if you're willing to invest and bring your whole self to a conversation, you'll be amazed at the number of people who would love to help the next generation of leaders and lenders.

I have had a lot of fun volunteering while building an amazing team at Republic. We're now a wholly owned subsidiary of Renasant Bank, which just announced an acquisition of another bank in the Southeast. Our future team is really set up for success. This goes for Republic and the Secured Finance Network.

What are your main priorities and goals as SFNet president?

For me and for SFNet, particularly since 2016, we've had a real focus on the future, and this momentum and commitment to understanding who we are and who we want to be, starts from a strong sense of community. Our industry is far stronger together than we are apart. The Secured Finance Network has done an incredible job over the last 80 years of being a strong community for our lenders, factors, lawyers, appraisals firms, field examiners, consultants, private equity, and bankers.

One of the things that makes our organization different is that, to serve on the Management Committee, you must be a lender.

Some of our priorities are to build upon the incredible success and strong foundation from past SFNet presidents, including Barry Bobrow, Jennifer Palmer, Peter York, Dave Grende, John DePledge, Jeff Goldrich, Andrea Petro and many more, who served before I became involved. Every five years SFNet has a planning meeting where we look to build strategic pillars over the next five years. The Executive Committee got together in April 2024 in Nashville under Barry's guidance, and in 2025 we will continue to build on that investment for our future and our community.

I believe we should be, can be and will be a larger and more inclusive community in the coming decades. More importantly, I want us to be a stronger community and that comes from a shared sense of purpose and advocacy. Lenders are at the center of so much, and I aim to include more private credit folks, banks and factors in where SFNet is going. We need to be viewed as a resource for advocacy, whether that's state or federal. The stronger our community is, the better we are at supporting each other, especially our clients, across our industry verticals, whether it's staffing, manufacturing, distribution, export, import, consumer goods, durable goods, or non-durable goods. The stronger and larger our community is, the more impactful and helpful we'll be not only to members but, more importantly, to those that need access to our capital.

A big piece of that for us and for me is continuing to invest and build within our chapter network. I would say our chapters are all in better spots than they were ten years ago. We've seen a resurgence since the COVID lull within our chapter community, but I think we need to continue to build and grow. One of the best ways to do that is to spend time together so that while we're building the Secured Finance Network community, we're making sure that we're also building the chapters along with it. It was fun to chair our SFNet IMPACT awards this year, which honored the New York and Michigan Chapters for their remarkable 2024, but so many other chapters did an amazing job.



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What challenges and opportunities do you see for the industry as a whole and for SFNet in 2025?

I think there are big challenges on the horizon. We had the first interest rate cut in nearly four years, along with a lot of mixed and uncertain macroeconomic news. There were some soft job and labor numbers that have come out. So, there's this early indication of some potential recessionary fears that have surfaced, but the stock market doesn't feel or look that way at the moment. We're always aware of the macro landscape, but during a recession there's probably more

capital put to work in our industry and our members provide that across the credit spectrum. It's both a fiscal challenge and an opportunity for our members to expand the impact of our network.

Whether it's our non-bank or our bank communities, SFNet centers around one of our chief missions: advocacy, which is what we're doing to help our industry, to build our industry, support our industry and provide unfettered access to working capital for small businesses across the world.

We continue to have advocacy-related challenges, with the state financial disclosure bills as well as federal legislative and regulatory challenges, such as Basel III. It goes back to stewardship, and we have to stay on top of these issues and

make sure that we're there to be a resource to politicians, committee members and the drafters of legislation so it is achieving what they're trying to achieve, instead of risking unintended consequences, such as decreasing access to capital to clients. Rich Gumbrecht does a phenomenal job getting ahead of issues that impact our industry and always leads in the best interest of our members. It's an honor to support him, our members and our community.

The other big ongoing challenge is remaining relevant. We've been relevant for 80-plus years, but to be relevant for the next 80 years means we need to continue to make investments in strengthening, growing and building our community in terms of members and volunteers, and to make sure that we are the center of putting capital to work.

When you aren't working or volunteering for SFNet, what can you be found doing? How do you find time to balance everything?

Time management or work-life balance is a cool thing to read about, and I was explaining this to someone that joined Republic a few months ago, but it is impossible to balance it equally in my opinion. In my 20s, I was way too glued to work, but at the same time, that allowed me to buy a finance company. So, it wasn't wrong at the time, but it sure wasn't balanced. Since then, my wife and I have had three young children, all boys, who are now five, four, and one, which, if you've been following along in the article, means all of them were born since I started serving on the SFNet Executive Committee. I think balance fluctuates during the week, day and times of the year. One's goal should be to show up, be present and be 100% where you are at the moment.

I think communication is a big thing, both with my wonderful wife and our kids. When I'm home, my goal is to be there one hundred percent in each phase of my life. For example, phones are not allowed at the table during any meal, so I am there with my kids and my wife and they're there with me. Of course, there's tons of stuff going on, but for that hour or two, I am fully present and engaged.

I think everyone wants work-life balance to be A or B, and I think it's all very gray. Some Tuesdays my family can get more time than other Tuesdays, but we have a family meeting every Sunday to talk about what's coming up for the week. Is dad in town? Is dad out of town? We're getting ready to have dinners and we ask the kids' input for what they'd like to eat. My wife created a Meyers Family Café breakfast menu that the kids can review for the weeks' options. When I go on vacation, I turn my phone off, and when my staff goes on vacations, I cover for them so that they can turn the phone off because I do really worry about people burning out.

When I'm not with my family, on the way to a sporting event or walking the kids to school, which is one of my favorite ways to start the day, you'll often find me on a golf course in the warmer months, typically teeing off at 6 or 7 a.m. with a

few people from our industry so I can get a little bit of work and enjoy nature at the same time. I really enjoy biking and traveling as well.

I have gotten really into cooking also over the last several years and love trying some of the recipes you might find at famous spots around the country.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

I fundamentally really enjoy what I do. I enjoy Republic, being on the SFNet Management Committee, and having conversations with so many people I never otherwise would have met. I love when I hear that one of our Women in Secured Finance events is sold out. I love what we do, and I really have fun doing it. We spend a lot of time working or volunteering, so I insist on making it fun.

One of my favorite parts of the year is at the SFNet 40 Under 40, taking a step back and looking around the room to see the families who support and recognize the achievements of our members. With the Hall of Fame, where we get a chance to recognize legends and titans of our industry, it's the reverse – it's the father or the mother on stage and their kids in the audience smiling and clapping and realizing that their parents made an impact on an industry of thousands and thousands of people. I really love to see the smiles and the true joy across so many people's faces that they get from volunteering or being recognized. I'm the proudest of all the ways in which people can get involved, have some fun, meet new people, and make a difference through SFNet. I love our industry's ability to recognize, celebrate and honor people in our industry. Whether it's at Republic, at home, in the community or volunteering at the SFNet, my personal mission is to create an environment for people to be successful, while being a catalyst for change. I feel blessed to be a part of it and look forward to the next 80 years! 🍷

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