

## R.A. Smith's Vaughn knows his boundaries

By: Jessica Stephen, Special to The Daily Reporter    November 19, 2015 12:47 pm



Nathan Vaughn (Staff photo by Kevin Harnack)

Nathan Vaughn doesn't mind explaining his work.

"I like talking about my work because some people misunderstand," said Vaughn, survey transportation manager with Brookfield-based R.A. Smith National. "They think land surveyors sit behind a tripod on the side of the road and take pictures. And we are taking pictures. I am measuring distances. But you don't want to get bogged down in technicalities."

Vaughn interrupted himself and started again.

"I'm interested in looking at topography. When I drive down the road I like to see how the water drains, the breaks, the top and bottom of things. You can visualize boundaries. That's one of the neat things about my profession. You know how to trace and recreate boundaries. And everyone wants to know where their property line is."

Plus, true story, three of the four guys on Mount Rushmore were surveyors. (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, in case you were wondering.)

"It's a nerdy thing," admitted Vaughn. "My wife says, 'Oh, yes. But they were also lawyers, Nathan.'"

His unabashed enthusiasm has made him one of the top surveyors in the state since he joined R.A. Smith as a project surveyor in 2006 — and one of the youngest. At 35, the father of five is well below the average age of 50 among surveyors.

Vaughn has been leading the transportation survey team for two years, overseeing all transportation-related land surveys for R.A. Smith, one of the largest land surveying firms in the state. He also advises the Wisconsin Department of Transportation on road projects for its southeastern region.

And, this past summer, the Wisconsin Society of Land Surveyors Board of Directors also nominated Vaughn for the Wisconsin Department of Administration's 12-member Wisconsin Land Information Council, which advises the DOA on grant funding and ways to modernize land records through the Wisconsin Land Information Program. He was appointed to a three-year term in July.

It's all because Vaughn took an internship in 2003 while studying geography at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

"I answered an ad that was posted at UW-Whitewater for a rod man, just holding a prism pole. I thought it was a part-time thing and didn't think much of it. But, by the end of my internship, I was interacting with them everyday. I was working weekends. I fell in love with it."

**The Daily Reporter:** When you have a bad day, what keeps you coming back to work?

**Nathan Vaughn:** My family, and not just because I need a job. I think it's important to show kids the importance of perseverance, being able to work through things, working through a problem instead of having someone just do it for you. So, if you struggle and have a bad day, if things don't go as planned, you try to make things right and move on.

**TDR:** What is the most useful thing you've learned since starting your job?

**Vaughn:** The importance of developing good listening skills, gathering all evidence to make the right decision about boundaries, so listening to the field person, listening to the land owner, adjacent land owners, public officials, being part of meetings. It's listening and understanding what's going on. From a boundary resolution to something at the office, being an attentive communicator is key.

**TDR:** What do you wish you'd learned sooner?

**Vaughn:** Listening to my wife. It makes things a lot easier. My wife, Amanda, is a good friend and I respect her opinions. She's been a good source of motivation for me.

**TDR:** What do you consider your biggest achievement so far?

**Vaughn:** Definitely obtaining my bachelor's degree. It's ultimately enabled me to gain a broader perspective on how things work, and when you go to college that's the big sell. But I feel like my professional life has really benefitted from that, and it's motivated me to be a lifelong learner in the classroom — I'm looking at pursuing a graduate degree — or at work. You've got to learn or you're not going to get ahead or be an effective leader.

**TDR:** What can you spend hours doing that's not work-related?

**Vaughn:** Playing basketball. In all of my free time. My whole 10 minutes. But it's a good 10 minutes.

**TDR:** If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

**Vaughn:** Patience. I'm an impatient person sometimes. I would change that and my thick eyebrows. I'm going to have those crazy, old-man eyebrows.

**TDR:** What are you craving right now?

**Vaughn:** Espresso. I absolutely love espresso, and nothing mixed in. My poison is a double shot. My mouth is watering.

**TDR:** Which famous person would most like to have a drink with?

**Vaughn:** Probably Paul Ryan, and not just because he's in the news — people have told me for years that I have this uncanny resemblance to him — but really just to see if, in person, I do look like him. And from a business side, to discuss our nation's infrastructure investments. My line of work is tied to federal, state and local government funding civil infrastructure projects, which I feel is in great need. And we'd have a local beer. There's a small brewery in Lake Mills, it's called Tyrana, and their Three Beaches Honey Blonde. It's so good.



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