NAFA President
David Robertson:
At the peak of his career, the best is yet to come
Let it be known that Dave Robertson has still got it — teeth and all.

The incoming NAFA president flinches at the question of his age, however, and sighs at the mention of 60.

Thankfully for Robertson, most people still assume that with age comes wisdom. At least in his case, it has delivered a broad variety of experiences in both public and private sectors, as well as the ability to make things happen — and shake things up.

He’s a self-proclaimed risk-taker, this one, a man who is willing to try a new approach to the way things are done. And in the next two years—which he considers the swan song of his lengthy career—it’s his hope that NAFA will grow in excitement, commitment and shared knowledge.

I will take risks, and I will encourage other people to take risks, too, he said by phone from his office in Houston, Texas. I think that’s the only way you grow.

Robertson got his start with NAFA back in 1988, when he attended the annual convention in San Francisco. Make no mistake; the irony is not lost on Robertson that this year’s convention is in the same city.

Back then, however, he was working for the city of Houston in the General Services Department. He stayed there until 1991, when he became fleet manager of the city’s police department, and was promoted last May to become fleet manager over the fire department.

The most recent move was a happy one, a definite step up.

It’s not a larger fleet, he said. It’s just bigger toys.

Robertson has always enjoyed working with trucks, he said, no matter what kind of equipment is hanging off of them. His first job in 1968, straight out of the Navy, was with Ryder Truck Rental in Miami, where he was in sales and branch management. The company took him to North Carolina, Philadelphia and Phoenix, but after Phoenix, he headed to Houston for a new opportunity as vice president of sales for another equipment leasing company. Not much later, the city of Houston made him an appealing offer, and he made the switch from a corporate environment to a public one.

As far as his new position with NAFA, Robertson said he earned it almost by default.

Past president Sal Giacchi stepped down in February after beginning his own service company, and the vacuum of leadership that followed was one Robertson could simply fall into. NAFA is very much a work your way up the ranks type of organization, he said, and with past experience as Central Region Trustee, Treasurer, Chair of the Curriculum Arrangements Committee for the Houston conference in 1990, Western Region Trustee, Co-Chair of the Public Service Fleets Committee, Chair of the Education Steering Board, and Senior Vice President, he was a natural fit. It was all that, he said, plus the fact that hadn’t ticked anybody off badly enough to not be nominated.

As senior vice president, I’ve been president in training wheels already, he said. But I am very excited about the opportunity.

He sees the job as part cheerleader, part educator, part fiscal manager, part CEO, and part administrator, and the biggest challenge to be meeting the needs of an organization that is simply not the same as it was when he joined.

When I joined as a ‘government type,’ there were very few of us, he said.

But now, it’s become about half and half. That presents different challenges, because we’re dealing with a different population. You have to look at how to balance the education program, because it can be different than in the private sector. Challenges abound for vendors with this trend as well, since you can’t wine and dine government people, because most government people can’t accept those kinds of things anyway.

Government members don’t usually have the resources available to the private sector, he said, but on the other hand, they offer stability, because they’re not as likely to be outsourced or merged.

It’s Robertson’s goal, however, to provide a more comprehensive approach that can meet the needs of anyone who joins. A supervisor once advised him to pick one organization and give it his all rather than to be a member of many without any real commitment, and the plan has served him well. His involvement with NAFA has brought great relationships and strategic

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insights, he said, and he hopes that as others become more involved, they’ll find the same.

NAFA has afforded me the opportunity to meet a lot of interesting and bright people in this business, and I’ve gleaned a lot from them, he said. The fleet business overall — and certainly this organization — is very much one of friendship. To say it’s a family would be a little corny; perhaps it’s not to that extent. But it is one made up of good people who are well-intentioned, a good sharing of information with a lot of nice people.

Janis Christensen, NAFA’s education consultant, is one of those nice people Robertson has come to know. She met him while teaching at a fleet management seminar, and in her opinion, there’s no doubt that Robertson will excel at his new post. He’s thorough and steadfast, she said, and when he makes a commitment, he follows through.

He just meets whatever challenges there are, said Christensen, who owns a consulting company in the automotive field. But what many people don’t know is that he has a great sense of humor, too. He sometimes comes across as being very serious, maybe because of working for the police department all those years. But he’s very funny in a quiet sort of way.

Robertson agrees that he’s charismatic and fun, and admits that he laughs a lot — even at himself. He’s also likely to be short and to the point, he said, and likes it when others give him the executive summary and spare the unnecessary details.

Don’t ever get the idea Robertson is a slacker. He’s an early riser — often in the office by 6:30 a.m. — and will usually stay until after 5 p.m. He’ll take lunch, but not other breaks during the day, especially not to sit around and talk about baseball, or football, or whatever.

But my wife will tell you that she’s never heard me say I really don’t want to go to work, he said.

That wife, Georgia, has been his partner for 35 years. The couple has two daughters: Heather, in medical school at the University of Texas-Houston, and Holly, in graduate school at Princeton Theological Seminary.

As for Robertson’s free time, it’s spent reading — he chooses a wide variety of subjects, mostly nonfiction — and working out, though he’s not exactly a fitness nut.

He works hard and plays hard, he said, and gives whatever he’s involved in at the time his all.

In coming years, Robertson will be giving his all to something else: retirement. When all the work is said and done, he hopes to spend his time paying a lot more attention to the stock market.

Before Robertson reaches that point, however, there’s much to do. And he’s ready to roll up his sleeves and get to work.

I really want to enhance the energy level of the people in this organization, he said. I want to increase the excitement about the products and services that NAFA has and that they need to have, too, for their professionalism.

In addition, there are the increased opportunities and demands of technology to deal with, the ever-changing impact of government, and the potential of better communication between vendors, public sector folks and corporate workers.

There are definitely interesting challenges here, he said. But it’s kind of like those fun trucks in the Houston Fire Department fleet: It’s something new to play with.