With 34 years of experience in natural gas, Pierce Norton has served in a number of industry roles. As president and CEO of ONE Gas and now the 2017 chair of the board of directors of the American Gas Association, his experience is guiding him on his mission to demonstrate the critical role of natural gas in our energy future.

BY JAKE RUBIN

When Pierce Norton talks about investing in people, supporting communities and serving neighbors, he is probably talking about ONE Gas, the natural gas utility he leads, which provides distribution services to more than two million customers in Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas. But he also could easily be talking about Heflin, Alabama, the town where he grew up.

The company and his hometown have a lot in common: They are both about the same size—3,500 people—and he describes them in similar terms. “In small towns, people tend to invest in one another. I have seen it throughout my life and career,” said the president and chief executive officer. “When you invest in the people around you, together you can accomplish great things, whether it be for the present or for the future. It brings a different level of accountability and commitment to your customers when the service you’re providing is going to your next-door neighbor, to your family and friends.”

His upbringing in that small town and a number of mentors he has had along the way have kept Norton, 56, on the right track and moving forward—both in life and in his career. He speaks of the value of patience and an abiding faith in heeding life’s plan, but he does not want anyone to confuse that with complacency or a lack of desire to make a difference.

One of Norton’s favorite quotes is from a famous Oklahoman, Will Rogers, who said, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

The 2017 chair of the board of directors of the American Gas Association has spent the past year overseeing a strategic planning initiative for the industry and is working to lead the organization to continued success—staying on track and moving forward with a more direct message than ever before about natural gas’ role in a low-carbon future, a growing economy and energy independence.
PATH TO SUCCESS

Norton traces his path to success back to the lessons he learned in Heflin.

“I always had somebody who was looking to make me a better person. This support network included my parents, coaches, a guidance counselor [who happened to be his next-door neighbor] and a teacher who inspired my love for math and science,” he recalled. “From a local community back home to those who influenced my career—who are too numerous to mention here—I’ve had great people around me who have been vitally important to my development as a leader.”

While studying mechanical engineering at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Norton put to work the values he internalized from his upbringing. Based on the principle of investing in people, he led Freshman Forum, a leadership development program for first-year students that provides guidance, training and civic engagement opportunities. He also worked with the new student orientation group, the Avanti Staff, examining students’ standardized test scores and Myers-Briggs personality assessments to help them choose a major and a career path.

“As I look back, I appreciated the value of these assessments, but I would also add an emphasis for them to listen to their heart,” the CEO said. “Success in business has as much to do with your passion as anything else. If you’ve got a passion for what you do, everything else should fall into place. Passion is one of the fuels that drives initiative.”

This perspective was gleaned from his years in the energy business and a series of opportunities that evolved not out of ambition, but the right mixture of patience and hard work.

Looking back, Norton has fond recollections of his time on campus. While many of the people he met in college have become his lifelong friends and today are leaders in their communities, it was meeting someone in the student government office, Debbie Harper, that changed his life forever. The couple married in 1980 and have four children. The Nortons remain avowed supporters of the university and enjoy attending football games when they can.

After college, Norton took a job in Tyler, Texas, with Delhi Gas Pipeline Co., which was a subsidiary of Texas Oil and Gas. Although he was there only three years, he gives a lot of credit to those coworkers for shaping his career. He remembers a particular piece of advice given to him by one of his mentors: “Success will come if you bloom where you’re planted,” a lesson he has tried to follow ever since.

In Tyler, Norton worked in natural gas gathering, treating, processing and transmission. Typically, at this company, an engineer would be promoted to the corporate office after two to three years. When Norton saw a colleague receive this distinction before he did, he wondered, “Why not me?” He now recalls it as a pivotal moment in his career, one that has guided his thinking ever since.

“You’re not always able to see what’s in store for your life or your career, but there may be
something bigger planned for you. Be patient,” he said.

His patience paid off: Not long after his colleague’s promotion, Norton was moved to Dallas, which led almost immediately to another move into a field supervisory role at a very early stage in his career.

Overall, Norton has worked for eight companies and lived in eight different cities. In 2002, he was named president of Bear Paw Energy, a gathering and processing company owned by Northern Border Partners, which was acquired by ONEOK in 2004. From 2004 to 2014, ONEOK became a premier midstream company owning natural gas gathering and processing, natural gas pipelines, natural gas liquids, an energy services business and three local distribution companies, including Oklahoma Natural Gas, Texas Gas Service and Kansas Gas Service.

Norton held various officer positions at ONEOK and ONEOK Partners and was in a unique position to help lead in that organization, since all of the companies he had worked for during his career were now owned in part or in whole by ONEOK. He knew the assets and the people who operated them.

In January 2014, ONEOK separated its natural gas distribution business to create ONE Gas Inc., one of the largest publicly traded, 100-percent-regulated natural gas utilities in the United States.

Norton was named its first president and CEO, a responsibility he embraced as an opportunity to honor the past while molding something new. He is quick to point out his gratitude for this opportunity afforded him by John Gibson, chairman of the ONE Gas and ONEOK board of directors, and the continued guidance he receives from the ONE Gas board.

“I was given several pieces of advice as I settled into my new role as CEO, including a reminder to not be afraid to ask for help, take time for yourself and family, to do the right thing and show appreciation to others,” Norton said. He often expresses his appreciation of the ONE Gas executive team and individual team members for their importance in his success and the company’s success.

On a personal level, Norton tells everyone that Debbie, his wife of 36 years, has been essential to his success, and that his life and career would not have excelled through eight different companies and eight different cities without her support. “My jobs required me to travel and move frequently, and she has always supported me and our family,” he said of his college sweetheart.
Norton cites his upbringing in the state of Alabama and his time at the state’s university as major influences in his life and career.
At ONE Gas, “ONE” has a special meaning. Norton says that the company and its employees focus on executing its strategy of Becoming ONE—ONE in Responsibility, ONE in Value and ONE in the Industry. Emphasizing all three is important to Norton and the management team.

Norton has found that giving back to the community has a way of unifying everyone. ONE Gas has been particularly active with United Way, supporting 67 different United Way agencies throughout its service territories. Norton likes that form of engagement for its multiplying effect: “It doesn’t only affect the person that you’re helping, but it affects their next of kin and their friends and their relatives,” he said. In 2015 alone, the company donated more than $1.4 million to the United Way in all of its territories, just part of the $2.2 million ONE Gas invested last year in the communities it serves.

**A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION**

Norton encourages his employees to seek a genuine understanding of who people are at a deeper level and to learn about their interests. Taking the time to listen to and understand others leads to a culture of inclusion and collaboration. Before becoming the first CEO of ONE Gas, Norton traveled to 75 distribution company locations and had small group employee meetings.

“Inclusion and collaboration is so important to the success of an organization. Every employee needs to know they can make a difference. We have to be inclusive and collaborative if we’re going to maintain and strengthen our competitive advantage,” Norton said.

He plans to apply this same notion of collaboration to the local distribution sector during his time as chair of AGA. He knows that moving the industry forward is essential for it to continue to thrive.

Norton says that a portion of the success of his nascent company is the result of its engagement with AGA. In addition to Norton’s role on the AGA board of directors, many members of the ONE Gas team are active on AGA committees and at meetings. “We are committed to learning from our colleagues in the industry and looking for opportunities to play a role in overcoming challenges that we and other companies face,” he said.

The incoming chair got a head start on this process this past year by overseeing a scenario-planning effort among a group of strategic planners and executives at AGA member companies to examine trends and long-term uncertainties affecting natural gas utilities and the industry. These include governmental policies, environmental concerns, economics, technology and innovation, and consumer expectations formed by social media and information technology.

“The first priority for AGA member companies is safety—safety of our customers, our employees and the public. Our customers have an expectation of reliability and affordability, but there are things that we need to do as an industry to give our customers—and the customers of the future—a better experience, including more connectivity and user-friendly technology,” Norton said. AGA recently won a victory in this effort when the Federal Communications Commission confirmed its decision to allow natural gas utilities to send automated calls and text messages to customers regarding...
SPEAKING OF WILL ROGERS

Known as the Will Rogers Highway or the Main Street of America, Route 66 is one of the most famous roads in America. Built in 1926 and stretching more than 2,400 miles—from Illinois through Oklahoma to California—this highway was the path for people who migrated west, and it supported the economies of the cities that it went through. It brought travelers from far and wide who either spent their money and moved on or settled in the towns that dotted the landscape along the way. Once they put down roots, they were free to travel throughout the country on this expansive road—spreading opportunity to other communities.

Pierce Norton has reflected on the impact and symbolism of Route 66 and sees a lot of similarities with natural gas. Where our nation's 2.5 million miles of natural gas pipelines extend, they bring the opportunity and prosperity that come from clean, reliable and affordable energy. In addition to methane, the primary component of natural gas, the extraction process can also produce propane, ethane, butane and pentanes, which are used to manufacture a variety of products in the United States and around the world.

Norton believes natural gas is the real foundation fuel for America’s clean and secure energy future, providing the backbone of our economy by delivering energy for homes and businesses, generating power, fueling a significant number of our vehicles and supporting other forms of renewable energy. Additionally, natural gas and the related natural gas liquids are a critical feedstock for the petrochemical industry. — J.R.