

# Ticket To RIDE



Mike Buckingham

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President, Real Estate,  
National American University

It's a well-known fact among corporate real estate (CRE) professionals that many of the people in this line of work fell into it while en route to someplace else. For **Mike Buckingham**, that "someplace" was jail—almost. "My aspiration in high school was to find a career in law enforcement. After graduation I worked full-time as a small town police officer until I arrested the mayor's brother for driving under the influence around 3:00 in the morning. By 9:00 a.m. I was in front of the chief of police being informed that I needed to look for another position."

Fortunately for Buckingham, the property management company for a local college had just such a position. **Dlorah**, which owned **National American University** in Rapid City, S.D., was looking to train and hire an apartment manager. With his dreams of being a law enforcement officer dashed, Buckingham was up for the challenge. "In 1984 I began to work for the company fixing toilets, planting trees, mowing lawns and painting apartments. The next year I assumed the role of property manager for 100 units," he recalls.

Soon, the company embarked on a period of rapid growth, one that spurred a series of promotions for Buckingham. "In the early 1990s the university was undergoing a transition. I was asked to consult on our facility in Rapid City, which eventually evolved into my taking responsibility for the property management of the 68,000-sq.ft.-campus. In 2001 I was asked to oversee construction of a new campus in Overland Park, Kan.; another in 2005 in Kansas City; and another in 2008 in Wichita."

In 2010, Dlorah went public, trading on **NASDAQ** as National American University Holdings. Almost immediately, the university experienced even greater growth—jumping from 17 locations to 37 between 2011 and 2012. With increased growth came more responsibility, and Buckingham knew that would require additional skills and professional training. He researched various professional organizations and their educational components, including the **Institute of Real Estate Management's (IREM) Certified Property Management (CPM)** credential before ultimately enrolling in **CoreNet Global's Master of Corporate Real Estate (MCR)** program. "The information CoreNet Global was able to provide was much more focused on the lessee than the owner and more applicable to my requirements," he says. "I have no regrets."



Buckingham poses with his Harley outside National American University office.

Today, Buckingham handles facility management for all of National American University's 37 locations in 12 states, which total 500,000 square feet. He also handles site selection, lease negotiations, design, construction and furniture procurement for all the locations. Buckingham's most prized achievement to date? Creating a system that utilizes demographic mapping and census data to help him and his team determine where to establish future National American University locations. "Once a location is picked the amount of information available on our prospective students and competitors from **Moody's**, **CBRE** and the **US Department of Labor** is huge. CBRE combines that into an easy-to-read presentation that can be utilized by the CEO all the way down to the campus director once the facility is opened."

But for all his successes, Buckingham says his job is not without challenges. The biggest? Developing a system to protect the university's leasehold improvements. "My goal is to improve the appearance of our facilities and establish regular maintenance that will extend the life of the assets while controlling, or even decreasing, the cost. I've set a high bar for myself and informed leadership of my goals, so now I have to step up and prove that we are up to the task."

Buckingham says his membership in CoreNet Global has been instrumental in allowing him access to other CRE professionals who have already overcome that challenge—and many others. "CoreNet Global allowed me to make contact with CRE leaders who are managing their assets centrally. Being able to document the path large corporate portfolios have established as an example has allowed me to convince my leadership to centralize Facility Management under my responsibilities."

For Buckingham, the benefits of CoreNet Global membership extend far beyond the sharing of best practices with other CRE professionals. He says the association's learning and professional development offerings have also proven invaluable to his success. In fact, Buckingham says he finds the courses so beneficial and enjoyable that he found a way to combine two of his loves—CRE and touring the country on his Harley Davidson motorcycle. He drove his Harley from his home in South Dakota to attend two CoreNet Global learning classes—one in Dearborn, Mich. and the other in Milwaukee, Wis.—in 2013. "What better way to attend a CoreNet Global class than to get my employer to pay me to ride my Harley for 2,000 miles?"

Title & Company:  
**President, Real Estate,  
National American University**

Non-CRE-related fun fact:  
**A 5th-degree Black Belt  
instructor with the American  
Taekwondo Association**

Favorite way to spend off hours:  
**Outdoors—hunting, fishing  
and hiking**

Best advice I ever received:  
**Get an attitude, one that  
others want to share.**

If I weren't in CRE, I would be:  
**Back in law enforcement. I  
had opportunities that I turned  
down.**