

SIUE master's grad puts his energy into energy



Segue • SIUE

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Each year, the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Alumni Association recognizes and honors alumni who, through leadership, character and hard work, have made exceptional contributions in their chosen field, in their community and at SIUE.

On Friday, Oct. 6, nine inductees, including two College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) alumni, were honored at the “Night Among the Stars” Alumni Hall of Fame banquet in the Morris University Center’s Meridian Ballroom.

On this week’s episode of Segue, SIUE’s premier radio show on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound that discusses the ideas and issues on campus at SIUE and beyond, Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, has a conversation with Matthew Samsel, one of the College’s two inductees. They reflect on Samsel’s educational experience, his career in energy trading and the structure of the energy industry in the future.

Samsel is a vice president and the head of trading with NRG Energy, Inc. in Princeton, N.J. He received his bachelor’s degree in economics from Saint Louis University before arriving as a master’s candidate in SIUE’s Department of Mathematics and Statistics. He attended his courses during the afternoons and evenings while working at Metal Exchange Corp. in St. Louis and graduated with a master’s in mathematics in 2000.

“The most important skill I picked up in the mathematics graduate program was the ability to think intelligently about probability,” Samsel says. “Once I had enough experience to think intelligently about what I was doing, assign probability and think about the distribution of outcomes, I made the most out of my statistical skills.”

Samsel values the relationships he built with various faculty members during his time as a student. Andrew Neath, PhD, professor of statistics, became Samsel’s close friend and mentor as he climbed the ladder in his career.

“It’s been nice to maintain that friendship over the years,” Samsel says. “We are in two different worlds. The research he’s doing does not necessarily apply to my job, but I like to think about the work he’s doing. It sparks my curiosity and gives me new ways of thinking about things.

“I hope the ideas we share also give him new ways of doing things in his additional research.”

Prior to joining NRG, he served in trading and leadership roles with International Power America, Citigroup Energy, Exelon, and Florida Power & Light.

“Energy trading is an interesting concept,” Budzban says. “How does one trade energy?”

“We are all great consumers of electricity, but the average consumer doesn’t have a great understanding of how it works,” Samsel says. “Energy trading involves delivering allotted amounts of electricity to the power grid, or certain parts of the grid, for determined portions of time.

“Just like any other commodity, you are buying and selling a physical product. Energy trades much like oil, natural gas or other products. Energy prices are volatile, because it is difficult to store. We have a limited ability to store electricity, so we have to meet the demand immediately.”

In August, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston. As flooding and hard winds ravaged the metropolitan region, two of NRG's plants in the region were caught in the storm.

"The wind damage was minimal, but the largest impacts occurred due to the amount of rain we received," Samsel reflected. "One of our plants in Houston received over 4 feet of rain, and we were able to keep that plant online."

"The impacts of the storm were regional, but the impact was decreased demand. A lot of people in Houston were flooded out of their homes and were not using electricity. Texas, as we know, can be quite resilient, and we saw an impressive rebound in the industry once the power got back up and running across the state."

Samsel and Budzban's conversation about the energy industry continues on this weekend's episode of Segue, which will air at 9 a.m. this Sunday, Oct. 22 on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications