

## Stewards of Progress NEFA's Executive Directors

Behind every successful association are the people who turn the wheels—not in the spotlight, but behind the curtain, keeping the engine running through calm and chaos alike. At NEFA and its predecessor organizations, executive directors have been far more than administrators. They were architects of community, crisis managers, innovators, and trusted stewards of a growing movement. With each event planned, board supported, and challenge navigated, they helped shape not just the direction of the association but the very culture of the equipment finance industry over the course of more than half a century. Their fingerprints are on every milestone, even if their names are seldom in the headlines.



### Setting the Stage: WAEL and EAEL Take Root

The story begins on opposite coasts—two regions, two distinct cultures, and two powerful associations. Out West, the Western Association of Equipment Lessors (WAEL) was just getting off the ground. Its first executive director, Art Schwartz, worked part-time but full force in the late 1970s, building WAEL from scratch into a legitimate platform for networking and education. His behind-the-scenes hustle laid the groundwork for what would follow.

The next chapter of growth came under Jon Bednerik, CAE (1989–1992), who followed Art Schwartz and brought steady vision and structure to the role. As CEO, Bednerik helped WAEL grow into a respected national voice. When more challenging times hit, WAEL rebranded as

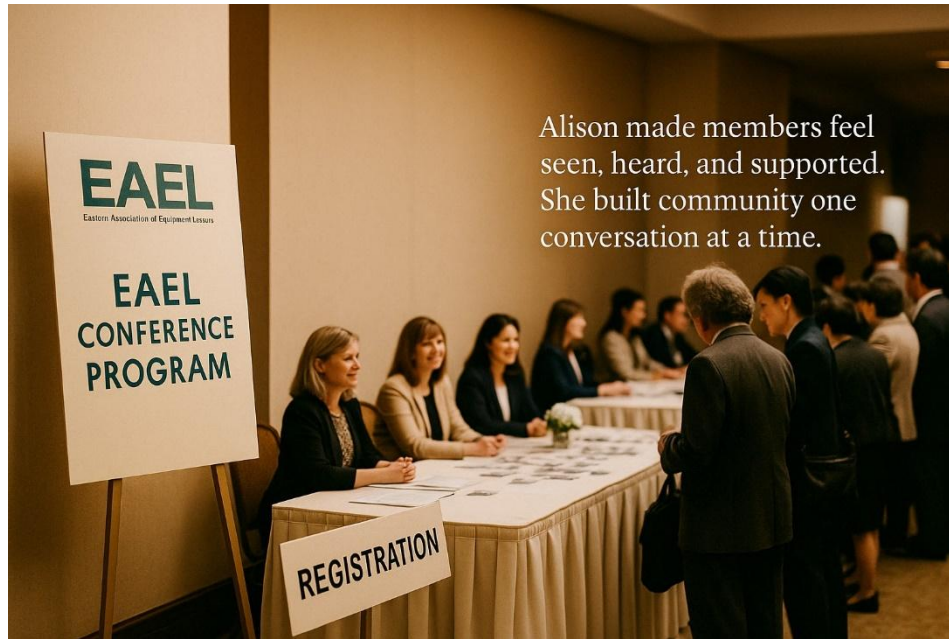
UAEL in 1995 to better reflect its broader reach—and that’s when Joe Woodley took the reins. A strong team backed him: Kim King kept operations running smoothly, while Bill Grohe, Director of Marketing, refreshed UAEL’s image and helped the association stay visible in a rapidly changing industry.

“Joe used to say, ‘The goal was never to be the biggest—it was to be the most connected, the most trusted.’ That really summed up his leadership philosophy. He believed in people first, and it showed,” recalled Jim Merrilees, longtime NEFA member and a past President.



*Joe Woodley*

Back east, the Eastern Association of Equipment Lessors (EAEL) thrived under Alison Pryor, a longtime Executive Director known for her calm under pressure and deep connection to members. Pryor’s gift wasn’t just logistics—it was her ability to make members feel seen, heard, and supported. She built community one conversation at a time and turned EAEL’s conferences into must-attend industry events known for their intimacy and impact. “She knew every member by name, and always made you feel like the most important person in the room,” recalled George Parker, past EAEL Treasurer.



Alison made members feel seen, heard, and supported. She built community one conversation at a time.

## Merging Ambitions, Evolving Leadership

As the industry grew, it became clear that regional lines no longer defined how business was done or where it was headed. By the mid-1990s, UAEL was focused on navigating change and scaling smartly. When Joe Woodley stepped in, he brought the WAEL playbook with him: build bridges, expand the network, and lead with purpose.

The boldest bridge came in 2008, when UAEL and EAEL merged to form the National Equipment Finance Association (NEFA). It wasn't just a strategic move—it was a leap of faith, built on trust, vision, and a willingness to let go of old boundaries to create something stronger. Two organizations with deep traditions, proud memberships, and distinct cultures came together with the belief that unity could fuel greater impact. It meant blending histories, aligning missions, and forging a shared identity—not through compromise, but through collaboration. The result was more than a new name. It was a new era.

That first year, Woodley and Pryor—seasoned leaders from each coast—co-led the transition with steady hands and a shared sense of purpose. Their task? To align systems, staff, cultures, and expectations stretched across thousands of miles and two deeply rooted associations. It wasn't easy—merging legacies never is—but they made it work through long hours, clear communication, and mutual respect. They laid the foundation for NEFA's future not just by blending operations, but by building trust.

## **Crossing the Chasm: A New Chapter Begins**

In 2009, with NEFA seeking long-term stability and a clear path forward, the association brought in Meeting Expectations—a professional management firm—to bridge the gap and carry the torch during a pivotal time. Tasked with more than just keeping the lights on, the firm helped guide NEFA through a critical identity-formation stage, providing steady leadership, operational continuity, and a fresh perspective. While the board searched for the next permanent leader, Meeting Expectations ensured the new association stayed on course, honoring its roots while helping shape its future.

## **Gerry Egan and the Push for Growth**



*Gerry Egan*

In 2010, NEFA handed the reins to Gerry Egan, who brought a grassroots sensibility, an entrepreneurial spark, and a deep understanding of the industry's human side. But Gerry didn't take on the challenge alone—his wife, Jamie, worked alongside him, and together they formed a full-service management team that delivered exceptional results. A longtime industry insider and trusted voice, Gerry knew that associations don't thrive on structure alone—they thrive on connection. He and Jamie reinvigorated NEFA's conferences, put meaningful networking front and center, and made the organization feel less like a trade group and more like a close-knit community. Under their leadership, members re-engaged, sponsors returned, and NEFA regained its footing in a competitive association space. "An association is only as strong as the connections between its members," Gerry often said—and he lived it.

## **A Digital Leap: Toglia and Sluss Lead the Way**

Upon Egan's retirement in 2018, Michael A. Toglia followed with a clear mandate: modernize, grow, and digitize. He elevated NEFA's brand, expanded its online presence, and positioned the

association for scale in a digital-first world. His efforts laid the foundation for broader outreach and richer engagement.



***Mike Togli***

Then came 2020—and with it, a global pandemic.

Entered Chad Sluss, MSA, who had just stepped into the CEO role to replace Togli. Under pressure from all sides, Sluss leaned into clarity, communication, and innovation. He rapidly expanded NEFA’s virtual events, grew its digital education library, and introduced new benefit programs that brought more value to members. He championed diversity and inclusion as cornerstones of NEFA’s identity and expanded sponsorship and membership at a time when many associations were shrinking.

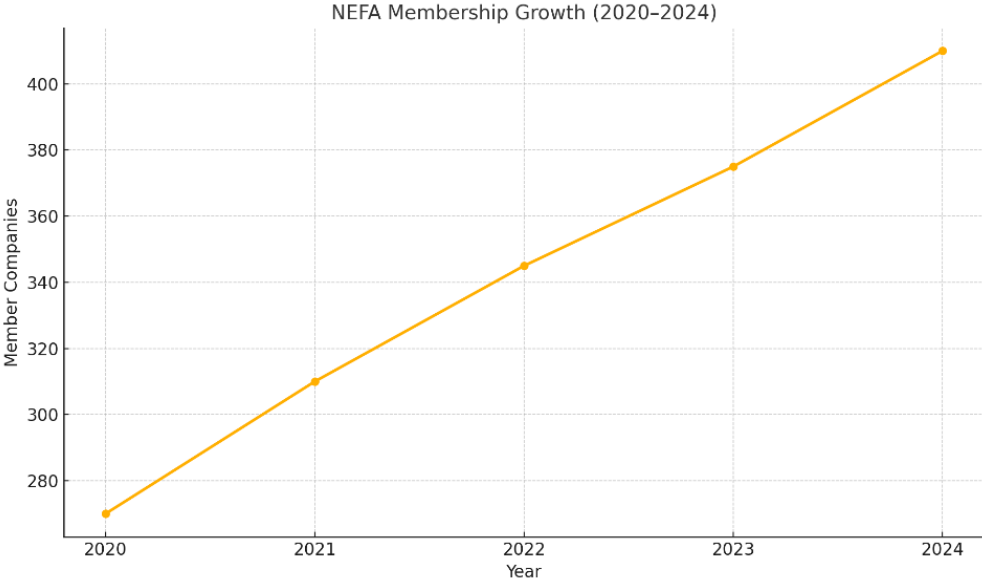


***Chad Sluss, Present NEFA CEO***

From 2020 to 2024, membership grew from 270 to over 400 companies. NEFA rolled out enhanced regional events, virtual workshops, and new discount programs. In late 2024, the

association underwent a complete digital transformation, launching a new member portal with a dedicated app and an online learning system (LMS) set to debut in 2025.

Sluss didn't just guide NEFA through a crisis—he positioned it for reinvention.



### A Legacy Still in Motion

From Schwartz's late-night volunteer hours to Sluss's 21st-century transformation strategy, NEFA's executive directors have been the unsung heroes of progress. They've managed mergers, crises, and cultural shifts. They've kept the lights on and the doors open, even though the road ahead was uncertain.

But more than that, they've built something enduring: a place where brokers, lessors, funders, and service providers gather not just to do business but to grow, connect, and shape the future of equipment finance together.

Their legacy is found in every new member welcomed, every conference handshake, and every conversation that turns into collaboration. NEFA's story has always been about leadership, and these executive directors made sure that leadership had a home.