Hands-on bridges

Sarah Fister Gale

When Chuck Prussack decided to pursue a civil engineering degree back in high school, he had never even heard of precast concrete. In fact, he wasn't sure what being a civil engineer was all about.

"I had a friend whose dad was a civil engineer, and he said they made a lot of money," he says, laughing. That was enough of a sales pitch.

Prussack, who put himself through college and graduated with zero debt, received a civil engineering degree in the early 1970s from Washington State University in Pullman. After graduating, he took a job with Chicago Bridge and Iron in San Francisco, Calif., but it wasn't the work he wanted to do.

After three years he started sending letters to engineering firms on the West Coast looking for a new job.

"I got a lot of responses and a lot of offers across the Northwest," he says, though he says that one firm he reached out to didn't respond: Central Premix Concrete Co. in Spokane, Wash., now Oldcastle.

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Prussack was about to take another job when he got a call from Central Premix. The general manager invited him to visit the plant, and because Prussack was planning a trip to Spokane to see his family, he agreed.

During that meeting, he immediately liked what he saw. "It wasn't a job behind a desk," Prussack says. "They encouraged engineers to spend time in the plant, to interact with what they were designing."

They offered him a job in 1979, and he's been with the company ever since.

As Prussack looks back over his years in the industry, he is particularly proud of the work he has done with spliced-girder bridges.

"When I started in this industry, no one had heard of this concept," he says. "Now the technology has become commonplace, and it has aided real progress in bridge construction."

He's also excited about the use of precast concrete for accelerated bridge construction projects.

"The precast concrete industry has a lot of tools to accelerate these projects," he says. "It's an exciting time to be in bridge construction."

Prussack also speaks fondly of his years as a PCI member. From his first PCI sales course in 1980—he cut his honeymoon short so he could attend—Prussack has been an active member and participant in PCI, attending meetings and participating on committees. He is currently secretary treasurer of the PCI Executive Council at the invitation of former chairman Greg Force.

"It was a huge honor for Greg to ask me to be on the council," he says.

Prussack always advises young professionals to take every leadership role that comes their way.

"If you believe in an organization, be active in it," he says. "It will always be a benefit."

Being a part of PCI has been especially beneficial, he says, in helping him build his network, solve technical problems, and make great friends.

"Looking back on my 35 years in this industry, being involved with PCI has been a constant and wonderful experience."

Looking ahead, Prussack is excited to see what the rest of the world is doing with precast concrete. While the industry doesn't lend itself to shipping products overseas, places like Dubai and the United Arab Emirates are developing massive projects using precast concrete, and those companies have a lot of valuable knowledge to share, he says.

"If we can apply their lessons learned to our own businesses, it will help us catapult the industry to new levels."