Meet Helmuth (Helm) Wilden

Houghton to Medal of Honor

Sarah Fister Gale

When Helm Wilden began college at Michigan Technological University in Houghton in the early 1960s, he had big plans—to become a geophysicist. It was a career he wanted to pursue, but he quickly became frustrated by the fact that engineering students couldn't take any specialty geophysics classes until their junior year.

After unsuccessful efforts to get involved early in geophysics programs, Wilden changed his major to civil engineering and never looked back.

After graduating, Wilden secured a job at United Engineers, then later went to work at Formigli Corp., a multiplant precast/prestressed building systems manufacturer, where he was promoted to the role of chief engineer while still in his 20s.

That wasn't enough for Wilden, though. He wanted more control over the project design process, so he opened a New Jersey branch office for the Richmond, Va.–based firm of Thomas A. Hanson and Associates in 1974.

With a staff of nine professionals, this office of Hanson offered specialty engineering services to the precast/prestressed concrete industry. Business was good for a couple of years but then the economy tanked, taking the construction industry with it, and Hanson was forced to shut its doors.

Undeterred, Wilden found a new job, at Universal Concrete in Pennsylvania, but after a couple of years he started to feel restless again. "I wanted ownership," he says.

In 1978 he launched his own company, H. Wilden and Associates (HWA). "It began as one-person operation in my basement providing engineering and drafting services to the precast/prestressed concrete industry," he says. The company steadily grew along with his reputation, and eventually it became one of the leading specialty engineering consulting firms in the industry.

Over the years, Wilden has worked on hundreds of projects, designing parking structures, stadiums, and modular prisons. His favorite project was the Princeton University Stadium, where he was involved with Metromont Corp. developing Viñoly (fondly named after the architect Rafael Viñoly) risers, which are perforated stadium triple risers with horizontal slots that allow natural light to penetrate the stands into the concourse below. "It had never been done before," he says.

HWA was acquired by TRC Worldwide Engineering in 2000, and Wilden retired in 2004 to start Wilden Enterprises, a consulting engineering firm continuing to provide services to the precast/prestressed concrete industry.

Over the years, Wilden has been an active member of the PCI community. He served for 13 years on the PCI Board of Directors, led many committees, and helped produce the *Tolerance Manual for Precast and Prestressed Concrete Construction*, which is still valid today. In 1994, Wilden was in the inaugural class of PCI Fellows. In 2004 he was named a PCI Titan, and in 2010 he was awarded PCI's Medal of Honor.

Wilden says his experience at PCI helped shape his career and that he often learned more from participating on those committees than he ever contributed. "Without PCI, the industry wouldn't be where it is today," he says. "It serves as the voice of the industry and keeps all of us up to date on technical issues, sponsors research to substantiate technical innovation, and provides education opportunities for anyone with an interest."

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He hopes that the next generation of precast concrete professionals will be as active in PCI as his generation has been. "Young people should not be intimidated by all of the gray hairs on these committees," he says. "We want them to participate and to have a voice in what is created for the good of the industry."