The joy of precast

Sarah Fister Gale

Like many PCI professionals, Kim Seeber didn't go to college planning to join the precast concrete industry. In fact, he wasn't sure what career to pursue. He was good at math and science, so his high school counselor suggested engineering. Then at the university, he chose structural engineering because it involved building bridges. "Bridge building seemed like a cool idea at the time," he says, "So I said 'put me down for that.'"

Seeber received his BS in structural engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1972, but the economy was so bad when he graduated that one of his professors offered him a research assistant position. It meant he could pursue his master's degree and stay in college a few more years. "He wanted me to get my PhD," Seeber says, "but after two more years and receiving my master's, I was done living week-to-week."

By 1974 the economy rebounded, and he took a position in Chicago, Ill., with Sargent & Lundy, one of the largest construction engineering companies in the country.

After a few years, he left the company and he and two colleagues hatched a plan to start an engineering firm in Liberia. A colleague was from Liberia, and his father was well connected, which they assumed would help the fledgling consulting firm land work. But it didn't work out as they planned. Seeber found himself in foreign country with no money, and with few options he got a job teaching fluid mechanics, algebra, and calculus at the University of Liberia in Monrovia. He loved teaching, but a year later he contracted malaria. After losing about 50 pounds, he returned home.

Once he recovered, he returned to Sargent & Lundy for a few years. In 1981, he landed in Spartanburg. S.C., at Tindall Corp., a PCI producer member. Seeber was unfamiliar with precast concrete designs at the time, but he quickly fell in love with the material and the industry. "It is so exciting to see something you design get built in a few months," he says. "Everything else is boring in comparison."

He says that his learning curve at Tindall was pretty steep. On his first day, his boss handed him the second edition of the *PCI Design Handbook: Precast and Prestressed Concrete* and asked him to design an 11-story parking structure. "I didn't know what PCI was, but the handbook was great," he says. He read it cover to cover and figured out how to design the parking structure.

After three years at Tindall, Seeber moved again, this time to T. Y. Lin in Baton Rouge, La., where he finally got to build bridges. He thought he'd settle in Louisiana for a while, but within a month the president asked him if he'd like to oversee a mass transit project in Taipei, Taiwan. He jumped at the chance. "I spent two years there and I loved it," he says.

When Seeber came home in 1986, T. Y. Lin's Baton Rouge office was closed, but Tindall took him back. "That's when I first got involved with PCI," he says. His boss was on the Precast Sandwich Wall Panels Committee and asked Seeber to take his place. Seeber agreed and loved it. "The camaraderie was amazing."

Seeber eventually became chair of that committee and persuaded the group to produce a state-of-the-art report on the design and manufacture of precast concrete sandwich panels. He faced some initial pushback, but once the report was produced, that part of the industry took off. "Almost no one knew how to do sandwich panels until we told them," he says.

Seeber left Tindall in the 1990s when it downsized. He became the general manager of Southern Prestressed in Pensacola, Fla., and in 2006 became a partner at Seaboard Services of Virginia, a consulting, drafting, and engineering firm for the precast concrete industry in the United States. In 2007, he started promoting precast concrete in China. He semiretired in 2012 but still does occasional consulting and speaking in the United States and China. He is also still involved in PCI. More than 30 years later, he still volunteers on the Precast Insulated Wall Panels Committee, served on other PCI committees, was chair of the Industry Handbook Committee, and worked on five editions of the *PCI Design Handbook*.

He finds committee work to be the best way to get engaged with the industry and his peers. "The great thing about PCI is that it is full of professionals who will offer you free advice anytime," he says. From his first committee meeting up to today, if he has a question he knows he can call any of his PCI colleagues. "If they can't answer it, they will know someone who can."

He encourages new members to join a committee as soon as they can so they can experience the same enthusiasm and camaraderie that shaped his membership experience. "It is a remarkably friendly industry, and you can learn so much," he says. "All you have to do is ask."