



MEET LARBI SENNOUR

The right place at the right time

Sarah Fister Gale



Larbi Sennour traveled a long way to join the precast concrete industry.

He started life in a remote mountain village in eastern Algeria, just one year before the country gained independence from France. He later moved to Algiers, where he attended the National Polytechnic School

to study engineering.

Sennour originally thought he would pursue a degree in electrical engineering. “It was hot at the time,” he says, but when he saw the civil engineering laboratories at the university, where they were crushing materials and testing the strength of load-bearing beams, he was hooked.

“The electrical engineering lab only had a bunch of old transistors.” He also knew it was a smart career choice. “People will never stop building things, which meant I would never be out of a job.”

At the time, his school had an exchange program with the University of Texas in Austin (UT), so once Sennour completed his bachelor’s degree, he headed west.

Over the next several years, Sennour received a master’s degree and a PhD in civil engineering from UT. During this time he worked for a while in the steel industry and landed a short internship with a precast concrete start-up company. That was his first experience with precast concrete, he says, and he liked how efficient it was. “The company was trying to build homes in just six months,” he says.

In 1995 he landed his first real job in the precast concrete industry with the Consulting Engineers Group Inc. (CEG) in Texas. “I was in the right place, at the right time,” he says of the opportunity. He joined PTAC, an engineering firm specializing in three-dimensional (3-D) modeling, in 1997, then was vice president for Raider Precast in Iowa for three years before returning in 2001 to CEG, where he has remained ever since.

Sennour had done his master’s thesis on concrete shrinkage, so when CEG landed a project with PCI to do durability testing on precast, prestressed concrete parking structures in the United States, Sennour’s name kept popping up. “My professor recommended me for the project, and CEG hired

me,” he says. Initially, he was only hired to support the original study, but the work was piling up at CEG and Sennour saw his chance. “I told the vice president at the time, ‘I’m a structural engineer, I can do this work,’” he says, even though he didn’t have much experience. The vice president agreed and assigned him a parking structure to design.

That was 25 years ago. Today Sennour is president and CEO of CEG, following in the footsteps of PCI legends Tom D’Arcy, Norm Scott, and Les Martin. “Precast concrete became what I do,” he says. “I don’t know how to do anything else.”

Sennour became a part of the PCI community early in his career thanks to that initial project, as well as the culture at CEG. “We encourage all of our engineers to be a part of PCI, and we have no restrictions on attending conferences and Committee Days,” he says. “We get so much more out of it than we put in.”

Sennour is proud to report that he’s been to every PCI conference and Committee Days event—except for the year his son was born. Over the years, he has been a huge part of the PCI community, acting as chair of the Technical Activities Council, Connection Details Committee, and Concrete Materials Technology Committee and vice chair of the Industry Handbook Committee, among others. In 2012 he was named a PCI Fellow.

He says he hopes other industry companies give their people the same opportunities he had at CEG to engage with industry professionals and to be a part of the conversation as the precast concrete industry evolves. “The leadership at PCI is thinking about the future and how tools like 3-D mold printing, programmable matter, and augmented virtual reality will change the way we work,” he says. There is so much innovation happening in the construction industry right now, and he says that he feels it is important for precast concrete leaders to push these innovations forward.

He also encourages his peers to do more to attract the next generation of engineers to the industry. “Engineering students still don’t know what makes us different from general construction,” he says. “The PCI Foundation is doing its best, but we all need to do our part.” 