Changing platforms

Sarah Fister Gale

Mary Ann Griggas-Smith started her career at sea, designing offshore oil rigs and submarines, but once she learned about precast concrete, everything changed.

Griggas-Smith spent her youth traveling the world, living in far-flung locales, including Baghdad, Iraq. After attending 10 different schools before graduating high school, she settled in New Orleans, La., where she earned her bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Tulane University.

Soon after she graduated, she landed a job with Shell working on an offshore oil platform, and she says she loved it. She spent every other week living offshore and learning everything she could about the operations. "It was very hands-on work," she says.

After a few years, she returned to Tulane to get her master's degree in civil engineering while continuing to work full time. She landed a job in Asheville, N.C., with a shipbuilding company, where she designed submarines and aircraft carriers. She might have built a career with that company, but a layoff encouraged her to take work as a design consultant.

"I did a small precast concrete job, and thought, 'Wow, this is really interesting,'" she says. That was the beginning of her passion for precast concrete.

In 1996, she and a colleague started their own firm doing precast concrete design, working with many big precast concrete companies, including Metromont, Gate, and Tindall. It was during that time that Griggas-Smith first discovered PCI.

Early on, she was so busy building her firm that she only dabbled in PCI meetings and events. When Tim Salmons encouraged her to get more involved, she decided to make it a bigger priority.

Over the years, Griggas-Smith has contributed to the eighth edition of the *PCI Design Handbook: Precast and Prestressed Concrete* and is now a member of the PCI Handbook Committee and chair of the Industry Handbook Subcommittee Chapter 13 for the ninth edition. She is also a member of the Fire Committee, the Total Precast Systems Committee, and the Technical Activities Council.

"It was great to meet all of these people in person," she says. "It got to the point where I knew that if I ever had a problem, I could call any one of them and they would be willing to help."

In 2012, Tindall offered Griggas-Smith a position as the South Carolina division's engineering manager. Then in 2014, Tindall's CEO Greg Force asked Griggas-Smith to start an in-house consulting group.

She accepted the position and today leads a team of 25 people as Tindall's director of corporate engineering.

Recently, her team has been focused on the design of three all–precast concrete residence halls at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C., using the company's new T-SLAB product, a patented precast concrete slab system that uses super lightweight concrete to serve as blocks over which structural concrete is placed for better load distribution and span capability. Griggas-Smith's group helped to develop the software to support design of the new product. "It's an exciting innovation, and I think it will get us a lot of work across the Southeast."

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When not working on committees or designing new products, Griggas-Smith spends a lot of time mentoring young engineers at Tindall. She notes that many recent graduates come to the company with little or no knowledge about precast concrete. "I wish the universities covered it more," she says.

Tindall is trying to close that gap by partnering with Clemson University in South Carolina, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and North Carolina State University in Raleigh to perform precast concrete research projects and by hiring interns even during the pandemic. "We look at it as a summerlong interview process," she says of the internship program.

She encourages other companies to make similar investments in the next generation. "Give them a chance to get their hands dirty and to spend time on the job sites," she says. "That's how they will develop a passion for the work."