

Drafted into precast

Sarah Fister Gale



Cheryl Rishcoff discovered her ideal career path while she was still just a teenager. Rishcoff grew up in Allentown, Pa., and in high school she signed up for a drafting class. She was the only girl in class, and her teacher took her under his wing. “I loved it,” she says.

She was also so good at it that she took drafting again the following year. Then, with her teacher’s encouragement, she applied for and received a full scholarship to get an associate’s degree in mechanical drafting at the local Lincoln Technical Institute.

Rishcoff graduated in 1988 and landed a drafting job with Base Engineering. After two years, her boss suggested she go back to school to get an engineering degree and offered to pay for half.

She took him up on the offer, attending school part time at night between projects. “It took 10 years, but I did it,” she says.

In 2000, with her newly minted engineering degree, she landed a job at H. Wilden & Associates, which later became TRC Worldwide Engineering. At that time, she still had almost no knowledge about precast concrete. “We didn’t learn about it in school,” she says, “and I had no experience working with it.”

She says she worried that precast concrete engineering would be dull and repetitive but quickly discovered that was not the case. “There were so many complex structures, and it was very challenging and detail oriented,” Rishcoff says. “It’s what I still love about precast.”

She was also quickly introduced to PCI, where she was invited to join Leadership PCI. Leadership PCI is a yearlong program that focuses on self-awareness, management, coaching for performance improvement, and change management.

The program had a huge impact on her career. “I don’t think I would be as actively involved in PCI if I hadn’t been part of it,” she says. It gave her a foundation in leadership skills and taught her to be a better manager and industry professional. It also gave her opportunities to build connections with other classmates and PCI members that she relies on to this day. “I still see everyone at Committee Days,” she says.

Upon graduation, Leadership PCI participants are expected to join at least one PCI committee. Rishcoff began by attending many committee meetings to see which group aligned with her skills and interests. She ultimately chose the Professional Members Committee because she was already part of a local American Society of Civil Engineers section and was excited to find ways to connect engineers and precasters. It was also a great environment to build her professional skills and connections, she says.

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She also joined the Fire Committee because it was a small group and she thought she could have a chance to make an impact. That committee went on to write the first PCI standard developed through an ANSI-accredited consensus process, PCI 124, “Specification for Fire Resistance of Precast/Prestressed Concrete,” to complement the *International Building Code* for fire design. “Being part of a smaller committee gave me an opportunity to do a lot of big things,” she says.

Now she encourages other new members to get similarly involved. “It’s great to attend PCI meetings, but getting involved makes such a difference.”

Rishcoff has been with TRC for more than 15 years and has helped design and build dozens of parking structures and total-precast concrete structures, many of which are designed for high seismic areas. “It has been very challenging because the codes are constantly changing,” she says, noting that most building codes aren’t developed with precast concrete in mind.

She says she hopes that her work on PCI committees can help close those gaps and continue to shape the way precast concrete structures are safely built. “I know my company appreciates me going to PCI events because it is an opportunity to connect with new clients and bring new knowledge to my network,” she says. “That adds value for us all.” 