

MEET TED COONS

Continuing a legacy

Sarah Fister Gale



Ted Coons was born to be a legacy in the precast concrete industry. In December 1957, his parents purchased Spillman Co., a manufacturer of precast and prestressed concrete products, in Columbus, Ohio.

In high school, after attending a two-week camp for future engineers, Coons decided that he wanted to become an engineer and take over the family business. And that's what he did.

Coons went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in the 1970s and graduated with a civil engineering degree. Tragedy struck the family when Ted's father, William, died of a heart attack in 1971. His mother, Barbara, hired Ted to be senior manager of Spillman Co. Coons later passed his civil exam and was ready to take a leadership role in the company. "A lot of our customers don't know I'm an engineer," he says.

He had little experience in design, but it was not as problem at the time because the company specialized in mass-produced parking curbs, stepping stones, lintel machines, and other wet-cast products. Spillman produced a biannual catalog, fulfilling more than 40 orders per day.

Unfortunately, by 1978 Ted also lost his mother, leaving a young Coons to run the company alone.

It was a big responsibility, but he found many mentors in the industry and in PCI, which he joined shortly after taking over the firm. "There were a lot of PCI members from my father's generation who provided me with guidance," he says.

That helped him reimagine Spillman's future.

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After joining PCI, he decided to hire an engineering staff and branch into structural precast concrete products while also going to night school to get his master's degree in business administration. "We saw a real opportunity to grow," he says. He also recognized that being part of PCI would help him

achieve that goal. "PCI members are our customers, and I knew we could serve them better if I was more involved."

Over the decades, Coons transformed the business. His team eventually moved into precast concrete specialty products, including self-stressing and free-standing beams, columns, tees, piles, flat slabs, and spandrels. They also developed the trademarked Plaswheel line and a line of Ezy-Stryp magnetic holding devices.

By the late 1990s, everything Spillman created was to specifications, and they served customers across the country.

Coons also became an active member of PCI. He spent much of his career working on the Plant Certification and Productivity Committees, he was also a member of the Prestressed Poles Committee and sat on the PCI Board of Directors. Through his committee work he helped develop the "PCI Policies and Procedures Manual."

In 1985, Spillman was recognized with PCI's Associate Member Award, and in 2001 Coons was named a PCI Fellow. "My family has always believed that you have to get involved in the industry you serve," he says.

In 2018, Spillman merged with New Hampton Metal Fabrication, an Afinitas company. Their combined strengths make up the Afinitas Forming Systems Division, with operations in both New Hampton, Iowa, and Columbus, Ohio. Coons partially retired a few years ago but is still involved with the industry.

Although Coons has cut back on his work schedule, he still pays attention to the industry and the association. He says he thinks that the future of precast concrete will require plant automation, and he urges producers to consider how this technology can help them handle their hiring challenges while managing schedules and costs. He says that every customer he talks to is frustrated by their inability to hire enough experts to meet demand, but so many are averse to even discussing automation. "The process improvements that come from automation solve the labor problem," he says. "You can get more productivity for every hour invested."

This digital transformation won't be easy, but he says he believes that companies that "get out of their comfort zone" by considering where and when automation can help will be best positioned to stay competitive in the future. [J](#)