



## MEET ANDY KEENAN

# Do what you like

Mason Nichols



Growing up in Streator, Ill., Andy Keenan had no idea he would one day work in—and help transform—the concrete industry. Initially, it seemed as though his career path would mimic his father's; his father worked for a local engineering firm.

Keenan's interest in his father's field led him to Morrison Institute of Technology in Morrison, Ill., where he studied electrical engineering. Upon graduating, he worked briefly for Sargent & Lundy, a Chicago-based nuclear power industry consulting group. Roughly a year into this experience, Keenan's father died, leaving his mother on her own in his hometown.

Keenan moved back to Streator, securing a job at an overhead crane facility 40 miles away. That meant an 80-mile commute each day. With gas prices rising, he knew another change was on the horizon.

"I was getting gas one day in Streator when a friend of mine pulled into the station," Keenan says. "He goes, 'Hey, I see they're looking for an engineer for a precast concrete company in Blackstone.' It sounded interesting, but I knew nothing about concrete. They liked my background and offered me more money and less driving, so I took the job."

At the time, Keenan's decision seemed inconsequential because it was based solely on the proximity to his mother, but joining Prestress Engineering Co. would prove to be the launching point for the rest of Keenan's career, placing him on a path that would lead to significant changes in Illinois and beyond.

Over the course of more than three decades at Prestress Engineering, Keenan worked on numerous bridge projects throughout Illinois, which included the construction of many precast concrete bridges in the state's rural areas. Much of this work was made possible thanks to Keenan's participation in PCI.

Prestress Engineering joined PCI in the company's early days because the owner knew the impact education and knowledge-building can have. From there, Keenan was introduced to a like-minded network of people interested in advancing the industry, and he ate up every bit of knowledge he could consume.

"PCI has all kinds of educational tools, sales classes, training classes, you name it," Keenan says. "I learned quality control, what it takes to be a successful business, and a lot more. It all helped so much. PCI gives you so many people to help you succeed. I took advantage of it everywhere I could."

Armed with these skills and knowledge, Keenan, alongside other Illinois precasters, founded the Precast Producers of Illinois, which is today known as PCI of Illinois and Wisconsin (PCI-IW). Along the way, he served on various committees and boards, including the PCI Board of Directors, Transportation Activities Committee, Innovation Committee, and as vice chair of the Soundwall Committee.

During this time, he worked closely with the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) and Illinois Tollway, persuading representatives from both organizations of the many benefits of precast and precast, prestressed concrete products, both in bridge and sound wall applications.

Keenan and the team at PCI-IW pushed strongly for precast concrete as a replacement for wood sound walls along Illinois roadways. Their perseverance eventually paid off, leading IDOT and the Illinois Tollway to change their approach to sound wall construction entirely. Initially, this also opened the opportunity for a massive, 1.1 million ft<sup>2</sup> (102,000 m<sup>2</sup>) precast concrete sound wall project to kick off in suburban Chicago, Ill., which at the time was one of the largest such efforts in the United States.

In 2013, Wisconsin-based County Materials Corp. purchased Prestress Engineering. Although this slightly adjusted Keenan's day-to-day tasks, he continued advocating for innovation in the concrete industry. This included the continued adoption and deployment of ultra-high-performance concrete, which he says he believes is the key that will help unlock more resilient bridges with longer spans and enhanced service lives.

Recently, Keenan worked on the Mile Long Bridge in Willow Springs, Ill., a 2024 PCI Design Award-winning project that features the longest prestressed concrete girders ever fabricated, transported, and erected in the Midwest.

Even with all this success, which also includes being named a PCI Fellow in 2018, Keenan credits the support of others for his achievements.

"I didn't do any of this on my own," he says. "I had help from hundreds of people along the way. It wasn't my brains that figured it out. I just used everybody else's."

For those who are newer to the industry or who are looking to make an impact, Keenan has a piece of simple advice

"Hard work pays off," he says. "Do what you like, work hard at it, and you will be rewarded, especially in this industry." 