



MEET KAREN LAPTAS

Accidental beginnings, lifelong impact

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Ask Karen Laptas how she ended up in the precast concrete industry, and you'll receive an unexpected response.

"I think it's quite by accident," she says.

Laptas's trajectory was heavily inspired by her father, who instilled in her a desire to value resilience and a love for learning. Her father was forced into adulthood quickly after losing his dad at a young age. Later, he served in World War II, and as a result, he never had the chance to finish school.

He poured all of his energy into ensuring his children would have opportunities that were unavailable to him. Laptas's father encouraged curiosity, embraced education, and made it clear that success entailed trying, failing, learning, then trying again.

These teachings stuck with Laptas, who said she initially thought she would pursue a career in landscape architecture and urban renewal. This led her to seek a bachelor's degree in environmental design at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. After returning from a summer program in Japan and taking a few engineering classes, though, Laptas realized her personality didn't align with the path she was forging. Engineering was much more aligned with her strengths, so Laptas pivoted, earning her degree from UMass Amherst in environmental design and civil engineering.

When Laptas graduated, the job market was tight, but she found a role as a design engineer at Blakeslee Prestress in Connecticut thanks to Frank Nadeau, someone who would have a tremendous impact on her career. At the time, Laptas knew very little about precast concrete but welcomed the opportunity.

After an economic downturn resulted in staff reductions at Blakeslee, Laptas moved on to Bechtel, a large engineering, procurement, and construction firm. This position led her to the Savannah River Site in South Carolina, where she worked as part of a government contract with the U.S. Department of Energy. Although the efforts there were meaningful, with Cold War-era contracts winding down, Laptas was once again forced to seek a new job. A colleague connected her with Metromont, where she was hired once again as a design engineer. At Metromont, Laptas's interest in precast concrete was sparked through opportunities to work on a wide variety of diverse, evolving projects.

Laptas's next landing spot was Unistress in Pittsfield, Mass., which she chose to be closer to her family. The decision proved pivotal because part of her role, which reconnected her with Frank Nadeau, required participation in PCI. This opened the door to committee work, deeper industry involvement, and meaningful professional growth. In addition to Nadeau, mentors including Irwin Speyer, Les Martin, Kim Barr, and Ned Cleland guided and supported Laptas along the way, ultimately leading her to serve on the PCI Technical Activities Council, along with the Hollow Core, Joint and Connection Design, Parking Structures, Precast Insulated Wall Panels, BIM, Blast Resistance and Structural Integrity, and Building Code Committees. Laptas also contributed to three editions of the PCI Design Handbook: Precast and Prestressed Concrete, was named a PCI Fellow in 2013, and earned the Norman L. Scott Professional Engineer Award in 2024.

"I don't think there's a better group of people," Laptas says. "The organization has people who will help you out and choose to mentor you even if you're not directly involved with them or working for them."

Since her time at Unistress and becoming involved with PCI, Laptas has held additional positions at High Concrete Group, Blue Ridge Design, and several other companies. Through it all, she has realized that all of her work—stadiums, mixed-use buildings, and dormitories—matters in the communities where they are located.

Looking forward, Laptas is excited to see how building information modeling continues to evolve, along with precast concrete's continued inclusion in building codes. She also sees automation as a boon for efficiency at precast concrete plants. But perhaps most important is the increasing number of women entering the engineering and precast concrete fields. Laptas recalls a time when only a few women were present in her engineering courses at UMass Amherst. Today, she says she is proud to see the widespread representation of women across PCI, its member companies, and industry suppliers.

In many ways, Laptas's story reflects the lessons her father taught: work hard, stay curious, don't fear failure, and always keep moving forward. It's a philosophy that carried her from accidental beginnings to an influential career, one that continues to help shape the precast concrete industry she so deeply believes in. 