

Herb Engler: Outspoken, Sincere and Well-Meaning



Most people who know Herb Engler would be surprised that he has a degree in genetics and animal breeding. Today, he heads Penn State Fabricators, which is located in Brooklyn, N.Y., and has done so for roughly 45 years. From cows to piledriving, how and why he made that switch says a lot about his diverse character.

After serving in the U.S. Army, Engler tried being an executive in an insurance company and was not content. “It was a large corporate firm complete with lots of red tape.” At that point, a friend of his family was looking for a new business partner. That business was Penn State Fabricators. Engler says he knew nothing about manufacturing, machining or the pile driving industry when he bought the firm, following the owner’s death. Clearly, he learned on the job, and did so quickly.

Determination

Engler relates, “The major gas shortage in the mid-70s created a problem for me since

the material we were using was dependent on oil by-products. When the oil shortage was over, the materials that were needed became plentiful and I was back in business full-time with Penn State Fabricators. If nothing else, I’ve lived an exciting life.”

George (Geordie) Compton of Construct Marketing and former DFI executive director, says the firm’s continued existence is a testament to Engler’s business acumen. Penn State Fabricators, a charter member company of DFI, produces equipment used in pile driving, mainly pile hammer cushion blocks and general fabrication.

Engler says he initially became active in DFI to learn about the foundation industry. Over the last 30 years, Engler has played various roles in DFI: starting as a committee chair, then as a trustee and liaison to PDCA (Pile Driving Contractors Association), next serving on the executive committee as secretary, and through today as events photographer; which he jokingly explains does not pay very well. Engler makes it quite clear that he has benefitted from the numerous contacts and acquaintances he has made in DFI. These have enhanced his business, he says, adding that he hopes he has given back to the association and the industry in exchange. Even though his is a small company, Engler says that, because of his large network of colleagues acquired through this involvement, he can call key industry players and get someone who can give him an answer to a question or can help solve a problem.

Compton says he and Engler go back to the “dawn of DFI.” Compton says Engler has the “unique ability and the singular capacity” to point out what he tactfully (or not so tactfully) calls “concerns.” This capability is invaluable to any organization, says Compton, who says Engler has been a voice of wisdom to keep DFI on track during its growth. Engler took on

mammoth tasks, such as compiling a member roster and desk directory during the Institute’s infancy. Engler is not shy, says Compton, “he helped scrap things out of the board, who at that time were mostly self-employed people, “dirty boots” individuals. Compton notes that Engler has run a one-man business successfully, and concludes that he is a “survivor.”

Voice of Dissent

When Compton resigned from DFI, Engler was on the board of trustees, and the board was struggling with the decision about who should be Compton’s successor. At that time, Theresa Rappaport, who started as a part-time secretary several years earlier and had worked her way up to assistant director at the time of Compton’s resignation, became the leading candidate. Her main opponent was none other than Herb Engler, who says he was “adamantly” opposed to her being offered the leadership role of the emerging DFI. He admits his opposition was due to her gender. He was outvoted and she remains executive director to this day.

Sheepishly, Engler has clearly risen above his original opposition to her promotion. He points out that during her tenure and under her stewardship DFI has grown from a \$500,000 organization to the current \$2.5 million Institute.

Steve Whitty, of Specialty Piling Systems (SPS), recalls meeting Engler at one of DFI’s annual conferences in Canada. Whitty, then of S.K. Whitty Co., one of the largest contractors in the New Orleans area, was a long-time customer of Penn State Fabricators, but they had never met. Once Whitty got out of the contracting end of the business and started his current company, which brokers pile driving equipment, the two realized they could help each other. Whitty helped by acting as a distributor for hammer cushions under the Penn State trade name Conbest™, and

in turn Engler provided plywood pile cushions to contractors in the Northeast from SPS. Whitty describes Engler as “very” loyal and dedicated to causes — even passionate. He adds that Engler doesn’t like the limelight but works tirelessly, and might be the personification of the term. He says Engler’s photos helped illustrate DFI’s early publications. The friendship between Whitty and Engler culminated in Whitty’s being the best man at Engler’s wedding to Theresa Rappaport, now Engler.

Joel Moskowitz, Mueser Rutledge Consulting Engineers, and a former president of DFI, says Engler was an early and ardent supporter of DFI. Trustees and members could always rely on his enthusiasm, dedication and not-so wonderful jokes, says Moskowitz, who adds that he remembers Annual Meetings when there were only about 100 attendees. Engler was always there during the lean years, helping to sustain the organization. Kirk McIntosh, another long-time DFI member summed up Engler as “friendly, good natured, caring and generous with a sense of family.” His own children see Engler as a grandfather figure and always ask about him.

Manufacturers and Suppliers

Manny Fine is another DFI founder who served DFI in many roles, including trustee, president, executive director, managing editor of *Deep Foundations* magazine, and publisher of the *DFI Journal*. He thinks Engler was an “ardent advocate” of DFI because of its early inclusion of manufacturers and suppliers as “full members,” who had equal footing with engineers, contractors and educators. He says Engler “quickly became genuinely involved as photographer, chair of the publicity committee and an active member of the DFI Board of Trustees.” During Engler’s tenure on the board, he was instrumental in starting advertising in the membership roster and newsletter, which later became this magazine. Fine says Engler had good ideas and could be counted on to speak his mind. He also recalls his one “clash” with Engler over the name *Fulcrum* for the DFI publication. Engler did not like it, thinking it too vague, and, after many years, in 2002, the name was changed to *Deep Foundations*. By then the magazine was up to about 60 pages and was printed in four colors. In

retrospect, Fine thinks Engler was right about the title of the DFI magazine.

Wide and Varied Interests

Herb Engler is a man with protean interests and the energy to pursue them. In addition to photography, he loves fishing, boating, growing vegetables and cooking most of the couple’s meals. He also collects cameras, pocket knives and antique tools. The crowning glory of his “extracurricular activities” is a winter Christmas Village with 144 houses, a railroad, train station and ski slope. The display comprises about 144 sq ft (13.4 sq m). All of this complex miniature construction is put together and disassembled every other year, says Engler.

Sadly, Engler thinks technology may phase small businesses, such as his, out of business. As he sees it, there are no more “handshake” deals. There is no loyalty, no trust, he laments, saying “customers will leave for a few cents difference in price.” But no one can say Herb Engler hasn’t had a good run, both as a businessman and as an active and loyal member of DFI. His imagination and curiosity will undoubtedly continue whatever he does.

Engler’s Christmas Village takes 80 hours to assemble

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