

Engineering Excellence

NUCA's 2009 Ditch Digger of the Year, Glenn Ely

By Jason Morgan



Engineering is about making parts work as a whole. It takes a sharp intellect, keen decision making and a little luck to put the pieces into place. When the pieces are the National Utility Contractors Association (NUCA), PKF-Mark III and Mechanical Engineer Glenn Ely, it's an equation that results in NUCA's 2009 Ditch Digger of the Year Award. Today, Glenn is a prominent NUCA member — he recently chaired NUCA's Education Committee and currently serves as the inaugural Chairman of the Treatment Plant Forum. On top of that, he plays a principal role in the conception and delivery of NUCA's Pipe Layer Training Series. Back in the early 1980s, Glenn was fresh out of college and just getting started. Graduating with a degree in mechanical and aerospace engineering, Glenn's first foray into the working world was with Monsanto Chemical as a mechanical engineer. Early on in his young career, Glenn's family life took center stage when he and his wife, Lynn, decided to move from South Jersey to Pennsylvania where Glenn's parents had offered them a little corner of their farm.

After some looking around, Glenn landed a position with PKF-Mark III as a mechanical estimator and never looked back. It wasn't long before Glenn worked his way up through PFK. After a year of being an estimator, Glenn started on jobsites as a mechanical engineer.

"I grew up on a farm, so I was always around mechanical things and my father was always keeping things running,"

says Glenn. "I came to PKF with a slant toward being involved with the mechanical side of things as far as our plant work goes. I quickly realized that another big part of what PKF does, and a part I really enjoy, is the civil construction. Concrete, pipe work and those kinds of things are in line with what I enjoy doing — building things. It has afforded me the opportunity to build bigger and more challenging projects."

Glenn's first early challenge wasn't job specs or mechanical failings, it was when PKF wanted to move Glenn to Boston. PKF had historically done work in the New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania regions, but the company started doing work in Boston and wanted to move Glenn and his wife there. After joining PKF with a mind of staying in the area, it wasn't an easy decision for the family, which had two young children with one on the way.

"In fact, my wife didn't move up with me at the time," Glenn explains. "She waited to have our baby and then moved up after our daughter was born.

"It turns out that my whole family ended up loving it in Boston. I had to drag my wife kicking and screaming a bit up there and likewise, I had to drag her back," Glenn says jokingly. "It was difficult, but it ended up being a real blessing for our family."

Family support has carried Glenn through the thick and thin in his career, and now a new level of family support will come from Glenn's oldest son, who just graduated

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Glenn on Politics

"It's important that every year our representatives hear from us and our need for funding and other issues that are important to construction. It's not like I came in one day, talked to a senator and he was convinced and voted in our favor, but I have a strong sense that our representatives listen. Year after year, it's a positive experience and it helps impact what they think. I definitely encourage NUCA members to be active and participate in the legislative side. It's different than anyone would expect in the access and voice. It's about supporting the industry when you take the time to come to D.C. and speak with or even write letters to your representatives."



from college with a mechanical engineering degree and has accepted a job with PKF.

"I'm really excited to have him work for us. We're making sure that he's not working under me," Glenn says with an approving chuckle. "He interned for PKF one summer as an engineer and worked two other summers as a laborer, so he

knows how we do things and our guys know him. We're both looking forward to it."

Having spent over 20 years with PKF-Mark III, Glenn has an extended family in the form of the company's nearly 60 salaried employees and around 90 craftspeople (depending on the amount of work). Just as Glenn has grown at PKF, the company has also evolved over the years. PKF had traditionally done water and wastewater plant projects, in addition to bridge projects. Fortunately for PKF, as one area increased in activity, the other decreased, which helped sustain work.

About eight to 10 years ago, PKF started to branch out into mass-transit projects such as rail, giving the company a three-fold offering in terms of projects that it participates in. PKF has also focused on what it calls "self-performance." PKF seeks to self-perform projects with its own forces as opposed to hiring a sub-contractor. PKF initially started doing its own mechanical work and then it moved into foundations. One of the more recent evolutions is that PKF has started doing its own electrical work.

"There are a couple of motivations for self-performance. When you control the critical aspects [of a job], you're less dependent on a sub-contractor and their ability to staff the project, etc. It's also an opportunity for your employees to expand their own opportunities to try and learn new things," Glenn explains. "The more facets you can complete of a project, the more you're working with your employees and more opportunities you have. Since we started doing foundations, we now have individuals that are experts in foundations who have come from our previous work areas. Likewise with the electrical work, I'm now responsible for the electrical work, whereas before that wouldn't have been an opportunity for me."

Having gained experience in electrical and foundations, PKF can now bid those jobs and those specialty services have been a big help in sustaining the company during the economic downturn. In fact, PKF's most recent new job is largely electrical, says Glenn.



Glenn with his wife Lynn after accepting his award at the 2010 NUCA EXPO.

Glenn on the Job

"We just recently completed the biggest job I've worked on. It was a \$100 million elevated rail project in western Pennsylvania for the South-eastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority. It was a huge undertaking in terms of requiring the off-site fabrication of composite concrete and steel decks and transporting those decks to the city. Most of the work was done during either weekend outages or week-long outages in the summers of the last several years. It was a rewarding project in that there were a number of design issues we had to work through and I had a great team and superintendent that was supportive."



As the company is struggling to find work in a competition-saturated market, having additional services is a company saver.

NUCA New and Old

Dick Foster, Founder of PKF-Mark III, had long been involved in NUCA when he started bringing Glenn to meetings around 10 years ago. Foster was nearing retirement age and the company needed someone to continue representing it at NUCA events. Glenn was that someone. Foster took Glenn under his wing — introducing him to other NUCA members, recommending committee meetings and showing Glenn the political ropes.

While Foster was a valued friend and member, he could only show Glenn the door; it was up to him to walk through it. Right away Glenn had several impressions of NUCA's value.

"The first impression was that the members were folks that had a terrific entrepreneurial spirit and a passion for what they did. They weren't afraid to say what they thought," says Glenn. "The other impression I had was that I felt like I had a voice, and though I was just one voice, I spoke for my company and I also spoke for a significant percentage of the state I came from.

"The whole Washington, D.C., thing was totally foreign to me. The first time I came to D.C., I was blown away with the access that I was given into the offices of Congress. And, this is true right from the beginning and for today, the issues NUCA is working on are so relevant to what our company

was and is going through. I saw a direct correlation to funding levels nationally and the work we were bidding locally."

NUCA also gave Glenn the opportunity to socialize with peers in his industry — a benefit that isn't often advertised, but is a big part of the NUCA experience. "As a guy who is loyal to his company, I wasn't out there beating the bushes and pursuing other jobs. It was one of the few opportunities I had to talk to people and hear stories from the industry I was in," he says.

The knowledge gained from swapping contracting war stories and hearing the problems and challenges that other contractors have faced is an invaluable asset to Glenn. To continue the learning trend, NUCA also offers Glenn and PKF a vast array of safety and training materials. Glenn receives the NUCA safety newsletters and bulletins that provide up-to-date info that PKF integrates into its policies and procedures.

Even with the experience Glenn has gained from NUCA, his biggest supporters have been his family. Glenn is thankful to have a family that understands the long hours and meetings at NUCA or PUCA events. His support system at home has helped shaped Glenn into not only an important and prominent NUCA member, but a great member of the construction industry as a whole. It's with a soft-spoken humbleness and a smile that Glenn accepts the 2009 NUCA Ditch Digger of the Year award.

Jason Morgan is Associate Editor of *Utility Contractor*.