2006

Trenchless Technology

Person of the Year:

Mark Bruce

Rewards Through Risks and Relationships

Leaders are not often described as servants, but that may be the best way to describe this year's Trenchless Technology Person of the Year: Mark Bruce. For more than a decade, he has served the trenchless industry and worked to educate and build better relationships among its professionals.

Bruce's roots in the trenchless industry are much like that of the industry itself. His foundation is in pipe manufacturing. Bruce became president of clay pipe manufacturer Can-Clay Corp. in 1988 and is now its owner. But it wasn't until 1995, when Bruce attended a trenchless tour of German cities as part of the International No-Dig Conference in Dresden, Germany, that he first got involved with the trenchless side of the pipe industry.

From then on, Bruce says, he became "enamored" with the industry. "It's intellectually challenging, and there's a strong willingness in the industry of sharing knowledge and a sincere camaraderie amongst the people," he says.

The trenchless business surprises Bruce with how much it has to offer its history and continued development are constant sources of intrigue.

"It's surprising how we take for granted the water that comes from the spigot and leaves down the drain, but without those utilities, some of which have been around for hundreds of years, our quality of life would be much different. Some might think all this business of pipes and conduits is somewhat mundane, but in reality, Bruce says, "their care, maintenance and replacement through trenchless methods require innovative approaches, changing concepts, new tools and methodologies that are constantly evolving."
“Trenchless technology captures my imagination and holds a dear place in my heart.”

Bruce says he enjoys seeing how new technologies mesh with the old, such as the clay pipe business, which dates back to before the Roman Empire. Clay’s operations have been around since 1934.

This enthusiasm for the industry led Bruce to the North American Society for Trenchless Technology (NASTT) after serving an instrumental role in establishing the Midwest Society for Trenchless Technology (MSST) in 1996 with some distinguished colleagues. Bruce became an NASTT board member in 2002 and recently finished his term as the chairman of the association.

What makes Bruce such a good leader in the industry is his willingness to put his service to industry above himself, says Mark Wallborn, senior vice president of Miller Pipeline and a former Trenchless Technology Person of the Year winner. Bruce succeeded Wallborn as NASTT chairman in 2005.

“He was very much in the belief that education and collaborative association was needed to grow the trenchless business,” Wallborn says about Bruce’s dedication. “I think he found that NASTT was an excellent vehicle in which to assist in educating future engineers and making municipalities and other interested parties knowledgeable about various trenchless methods.”

When you talk to Bruce, three things stand out among all his experience: risks, relationships and a sense of retaining what he has learned to the industry — the three Rs if you will. Bruce says without taking risks and building the relationships he has, he wouldn’t have had such success. And without that success, he wouldn’t be able to give back to the industry that has employed him for nearly 20 years.

Building on Risks

For Bruce, success is measured less in terms of money than it is in terms of overcoming challenges and accomplishing tasks. He believes hard work and dedication are what are required of anyone to achieve goals, but it also takes learning from experience.

“Hard work and numerous hours are required,” Bruce says of this ethic. “I was brought up in family owned construction and coal mining businesses where that was normal. I think it takes a willingness to step out and take some challenges, take some risks. And from that you grow and become a better, stronger person.

“To stay in a comfort zone without challenges precludes a lot of the learning curve.”

He graduated as a civil engineer from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, but says, “The real education begins on the job.” His list of experiences is extensive. He has worked as a heavy equipment operator, licensed river pilot, built river and ocean ports, mine processing plants, bridges, operated surface coal mines and other construction projects.

“Interestingly, I laid my first clay sewer pipe when I was 14, applying mortar to the old type pipes in the trench.” He adds, “No wonder the trenchless rehab business continues to expand, in those days there was neither installation training nor inspections.” More recently due to his trenchless pipe business, he has been on trenchless projects on five continents.“Meeting new people, sharing ideas, viewing new techniques and experiencing different cultures is stimulating,” says Bruce.

Bruce believes in getting involved personally and financially with his business enterprises and his knack for taking on challenges and learning from his mistakes have paid off, allowing him to become a better leader. “I have never had a job interview and always worked in companies as an owner,” he says. He continues to follow this philosophy through a recently acquired equity position in HydroMax USA, a provider of trenchless inspection and SMS data collection services.

Bruce’s abilities were apparent when Wallborn when the two first met in 2001. Wallborn considers Bruce among the minority of people who will do the heavy lifting in a group.

“He is a doer, not a talker,” Wallborn says. “He had a real calm confidence about him that was sprinkled with just the right amount of levity, the right amount of humor, but just a calm sense of confidence.”

Wallborn attributes Bruce as one of the people who helped NASTT emerge from a down period and reviving the association’s No-Dig conference. “There were some of us who really decided to use our personal and professional collateral to try and bring about an epiphany [within NASTT],” he says.

The lesson that Wallborn says can be learned from Bruce is that you should have a dogged commitment to following through on your word and put the good of the service of the industry above the good of the self.

Bruce credits his success to the people who have given him the chance to learn and grow in the industry.

“During my early years, when I was just a young teenager working construction, those people didn’t chug off a wet noodle kid, but allowed me to learn and make mistakes,” Bruce says. “I look back in respect for and appreciation of all these people who have helped me become what I am.”

Strength from Relationships

In addition to taking and learning from risks, Bruce emphasizes relationships as a crucial aspect of success. One of the ways Bruce has managed to build so many strong relationships in the trenchless industry is by participating in professional organizations, such as NASTT and MSST.

Bruce served as program chairman for the 2005 International No-Dig Conference. From there, he became the chairman of NASTT itself. Bruce emphasizes the society’s goals of education and industry promotion as one...
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In fact, one of the most important relationships of his life has come from attending an industry event. While attending the International No-Dig conference in Copenhagen in 2002, Bruce met his wife, Camilla.

Returning the Favor
Bruce wants to continue to give back to the industry that he says has given him so much. In so doing, Bruce promotes trenchless technology by continuing to be an active participant in NASTT and making the attempt to speak at numerous seminars each year — in a word, education.

"There are many great opportunities out there to learn, and we just need to make sure we avail ourselves and encourage others to use those as much as possible," Bruce says. "Without education we all will just keep making the same mistakes."

One of the challenges Bruce sees in the industry is continuing to move forward and make improvements. The industry cannot lose ground or become complacent. "We have to keep expecting higher and higher levels of confidence in ourselves, our products and techniques, as well as our organizations that we're associat-
PERSON OF THE YEAR

less industry will bring more success, Bruce says, by lowering costs, improving safety and improving society for current and future generations.

Bruce stresses that education of younger people in the trenchless industry is a necessary component of improving technologies and moving forward in the business.

Through his commitment to education and as chairman of NASTT, Bruce has been instrumental in furthering the forward momentum of the industry, says Wallborn, attributing Bruce as one of the people who has helped make NASTT the industry what it is today.

"Mark was just the right person at the right time to step into a major leadership role," he says. "His steady, unassuming and visionary nature was just what we needed."

Wallborn likens Bruce's leadership to a second-stage rocket, helping lift NASTT out of what Wallborn calls its "cphonias" in 2001-2002 with selfless leadership and commitment to education.

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— Mark Bruce

Bruce says none of his success would be possible without the example of and help from those who went before him. "I have had and continue to have the opportunity to work with some of the most wonderful people imaginable in and out of the trenchless industry.

"There is such a wealth of great people in this industry I cannot say enough for it," he says. "The willingness to share and educate each other in this industry is very unusual across such a broad spectrum of interest groups. The people have been so wonderful and giving to me. I am truly thankful to them."

In turn, Bruce plans to use his experiences and knowledge to continue serving the trenchless industry by being willing to contribute to the industry.

Bradley Kromer is assistant editor of Trenchless Technology.

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