George Piscsalko: A Quiet Curiosity

George Piscsalko is a lucky man. He has worked for the same firm for 29 years, Pile Dynamics, Inc., and still loves to go to work each day. His DFI colleagues describe him as possessing “honesty, integrity and technical capabilities.” Chris Schewmaker, Illini Drilled Foundations, singles out Piscsalko’s willingness during DFI Technical Committee meetings to “put aside commercial interests and focus on overall industry needs,” adding that “this speaks volumes to his character.”

Piscsalko, who has served on the DFI Augured Cast-in-place (ACIP) Pile Committee for 10 years, won the 2013 William C. Bermingham Innovation Award, with Professor Gray Mullins of the University of Southern Florida, for Pile Dynamic’s Thermal Integrity Profiler (TIP). Mullins puts Piscsalko “at the top of his list.” saying that civil engineering is lucky to have him, that with his electronic talents, he could have gone anywhere. He has a light burning; you know he is always processing everything going on. Mullins also cites Piscsalko’s “quiet glow, a curiosity and excitement that never goes away.” He is willing to entertain any idea I throw out, no matter how crazy.” Praise for Piscsalko comes from yet another source, Silas Nichols, of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). He thinks Piscsalko has a “great aptitude for understanding and addressing the technical needs of the public and the private sector.”

Piscsalko was born and raised in the Cleveland area, and his second job was with Pile Dynamics. His short-lived former job was with a firm with 1,500 employees, and he left for one with 15 people (PDI now has about 20 engineers on staff). He says he was always curious, liked solving problems and likes to “make things better.” PDI and GRL are sister companies founded by Garland Likins, Frank Rausche and George Goble. As PDI began to expand, they hired Piscsalko in 1984. As he puts it, he was in the “right place at the right time” — the timing was, in fact, “fantastic.” Piscsalko says Rausche and Likins are “great people,” he learns something every day, and that he is a “small part” of the process. He has looked forward to coming to work every day for all 29 years.

In a smaller firm, he says, you get to see and experience the whole picture, all the mechanical, electrical and other elements of products in the field, as opposed to being just a “piece” of the picture. “You learn more,” he says. The best part of his job is when you rise to a challenge, add features, refine. His mantra at PDI appears to be “never be satisfied.” Describing his work, he says the firm sets milestones, via feedback from customers and also responding to the constant evolution of hardware and software. There are also surprises. For example “when a company cancels a component, you’ve put in a product, you either cancel, stop selling the item, or re-design.”

Thermal Integrity Profiler

Mullins and Piscsalko’s collaboration illustrates the evolution of technical advances. The two started talking about four years ago, when Mullins was doing research with infrared probes used to measure the elevated heat of hydration temperatures via access tubes cast into shafts. The two conferred and agreed to work together — putting solid state instruments into Mullins’s probe and developing a Thermal Wire® cable which can be cast directly into the pile. The great advantage, he says, is that you don’t need to send the engineer to the site — you take travel and time out of the testing process. Mullins and Piscsalko are currently working on applications for the TIP, for example, on ACIP piles. George Piscsalko offers his view of ACIP piles. “They are a nice alternative due to the speed at which they can be installed, the low vibrations associated with these pile types (can be installed adjacent to existing structures), and the flexibility to install in situations such as low headroom.” He thinks there is some hesitancy from some designers to use ACIP piles because of the unknown completed pile shape. The ability of NDT (Non-Destructive Testing) products, and TIP specifically to verify the structural integrity of ACIP piles, will help to grow the market share for this pile type, he thinks.

At PDI, Piscsalko works with the firm’s R&D Board, helping prioritize and set milestones, and see that the work is done on time. Engineers are curious, he says, and PDI
has dozens of products, and does manufacturing as well as refining ideas. The firm personally funds all its R & D projects. According to Piscalko, PDI takes ideas and implements them. Our customers want to prove the integrity and capacity of what they are trying to do. “Load-testing, for example,” he says, “they can tell us about a need, then we test the nuts and bolts.” Piscalko sees increased testing as the electronics industry evolves. The idea of burying sensors such as MEMS (Micro-Electro-Mechanical Systems) is one area that is interesting. Costs of testing will come down, so we will see more testing. Cloud computing is another factor; we have the ability to test conveniently, with no need to travel to a construction site.

The Lab in the Basement

Piscalko’s dad was an electronic technician and the family had a lab in their basement. Young George tinkered, and his father helped him to make his first voltmeter. At an adult, he wired his own house, which now has over 100 individual circuits. He was an electronic geek as a youth, and some might say he still is. The family has four children, one is an urban planner, one a nursing student, one is majoring in math and the fourth is still in high school, with a career as yet unknown. When I met Piscalko, he had arrived a little late for the DFI Annual Conference. The day before was his and his wife, Cathy’s 25th anniversary. Sounds like Piscalko is lucky in his home life, too.

Piscalko spends a lot of time with DFI activities. Tracy Brettmann of Berkel and Company has worked with Piscalko on the ACIP Pile Committee, and says he has “always admired George for his honesty and integrity in addition to his technical capabilities.” He has practical and well-reasoned ideas and “I have always been impressed with his willingness to make improvements.” Matt Meyer, Langan Engineering and Environmental Services, agrees, saying has “always found George’s contributions to the ACIP Pile Committee to be of significant value,” adding that his leadership in the deep foundation industry is illustrated through his extensive knowledge of Non-Destructive Testing (NDT) techniques, automated monitoring equipment and advancement of evolving NDT techniques.” Chris Schewmaker says of Piscalko that he is a “very willing volunteer for DFI, and that his expertise in the NDT and pile monitoring fields has been invaluable in the committee efforts.” According to Schewmaker, Piscalko “always brings a smile to the table and is willing to compromise for the benefit of the industry, which exemplifies him as one of the leaders in our industry.”

George Piscalko sees DFI as a great opportunity. He and his committee exchange ideas, and the DFI meetings provide opportunities for wider networking and communication. He gets news from other DFI members at conferences along with ideas and sometimes problems that PDI will want to solve. It’s a perfect organization for him and for others.

Virginia Fairweather