

May 19, 2010

UW Construction Hall of Fame adds 3 new members

Gene Colin, Ed Kommers and Jon Runstad will be inducted during a June 4 banquet in Seattle.

By BENJAMIN MINNICK
Journal Construction Editor

The University of Washington's Department of Construction Management has added three men to its Construction Industry Hall of Fame: a contractor, a developer and an association director.

Gene J. Colin, H. Jon Runstad and Ed Kommers will be honored at a June 4 banquet at the Bell Harbor International Conference Center in Seattle. They were chosen for leadership and their support of construction education. They join 29 others who have been inducted since the program was founded in 1995.

Gene J. Colin



Colin

The CEO and chairman of Ferguson Construction is a big proponent of education, serving on the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board and the boards of the AGC of Washington Education Foundation, South Seattle Community College Foundation and Eastside Catholic High School.

In 1995, Colin accepted a challenge from Roland Dewhurst, who headed up the AGC Southern District office at the time and later became CEO of AGC of Washington. The challenge? Walk together from the AGC offices in Tacoma to the AGC offices in Seattle — nearly 40 miles — to raise money for the association's Education Foundation.

Colin said they left at 4 a.m. and arrived in Seattle at 4 p.m. Colin said he hit the wall when he reached downtown Seattle, but Dewhurst egged him on and both reached their destination — and together raised \$60,000.

“I’ve been around construction all my life,” Colin said. Growing up in the New York/New Jersey area, he found summer work with his father, who was a stone mason before opening a construction company in the late 1940s.

Shortly after graduating from Rutgers University with a civil engineering degree, Colin was drafted by the Army and served in Vietnam and Japan. He went back to work with his father, but decided he wanted to find his own place in the world. He traveled to Seattle to meet an Army buddy with a plan to seek their fortunes in California. Colin found they didn't have enough money even to get to Portland, so they took jobs at Boeing.

Colin worked in the construction facilities division, where he represented the airplane maker on its new space center in Kent. He also supervised some work Ferguson Construction was doing at the space center.

In 1967, Colin and scores of others at Boeing began worrying about their jobs. “I had a strong feeling that I was last in and first out at Boeing,” Colin said about his two-year stint there.

Ties with Ferguson paid off when Colin found a job there. He started doing gofer work, such as running plans between architects' and clients' offices, and did some engineering drawings. Eventually he worked in every department at the company, except accounting, before becoming president in 1980.

When company founder Hugh Ferguson retired in 1982, Colin and three others bought the company. Two years later, he became sole owner when the others left.

Colin is still majority owner, but is working on a succession plan with current president Todd Vacura. He said it will probably be three to five years before Vacura becomes majority owner, depending on the company's profitability.

Colin said he has had more time to devote to community involvement since Vacura took over in late 2003. He's still on the Higher Education Coordinating Board and the boards of South Seattle Community College and Eastside Catholic High. He's also on the board of Pacific Medical Center and does committee work for the AGC. In the past, he was on the Washington State Building Code Council.

You might also see Colin out on his Harley-Davidson and Honda Goldwing motorcycles. Colin said he got back into the sport in 2006, when he and a friend had their Goldwings shipped to San Diego and rode down the Baja Peninsula to Cabo San Lucas.

Since then, he has taken trips to the Canadian Rockies, Death Valley, and Bryce Canyon and Zion national parks. This summer it's Mount Rushmore and the Dakotas.

Colin said his company gives to many charities, but focuses on Susan G. Komen for the Cure and Seattle Children's.

Ferguson Construction made a big difference on a new headquarters and treatment facility on Airport Way for Wellspring Family Services, Colin said.

The project had a \$4.2 million pledge from Seattle Rotary, but was still short of funds. Colin said he became enthusiastic about the project and agreed not to charge a fee so work could start on time.

The building was dedicated in June of 2009 as part of Seattle Rotary's 100th anniversary celebration.

“These are the areas that I enjoy a lot,” Colin said. “A company should give back to its employees first. Secondly, it should give back to its industry. Thirdly, it should give back to the community that allowed us to prosper.”

Hugh Ferguson, also a construction hall of famer, shared that philosophy and Colin said he wants to bring it to maturity. Colin said he also wants to see the company through its third tier of ownership, which is somewhat rare.

“It's a success story I'm very, very proud of,” he said.