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Jim Loftus

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Dan O'Neill, interviewer

Dan O'Neill asked Jim about the creation of his structural engineering company. Jim said he got his master's degree and came back to Fairbanks. He was married to Eileen by this time. He couldn't get a job in Fairbanks and returned to Seattle and got a job. He worked for a very prestigious structural engineer company. They did a lot of high rise work. He was concerned that Fairbanks did not have a structural engineer. He wanted to work at a large structural firm and learn how to be a structural engineer. He worked on the 76 story Columbia Center. He designed all the floors in that building and most of the non-gravity columns. He discussed structural engineering. Each floor had a different framing system. There would be different loads. He worked on a 25 story building in San Francisco, hospitals, buildings in Seattle, the King County Correctional Facility and other good projects. He said you become a cog in a wheel in the big firms. He missed living in Fairbanks. In 1983 they drove up to Fairbanks and spent a few weeks. There wasn't a structural engineering firm in Fairbanks and a lot of the big projects were designed in Anchorage or Seattle. He decided to move back to Fairbanks and start a firm.

They returned to Fairbanks in 1984 and he started his firm. Tom Rosadiuk let him move into his building. They were on Aurora Street. Tom gave him an office without rent. He started to do projects. He was doing housing inspections. He did the Utility Services Building. He got a job adding the fifth floor to the Denali State Bank Building. His business grew from there. He was always able to get another job before they ran out of money. He started hiring people like John Paulson and Pat Reinhardt. By the next year they had four people. Maureen Lee worked in the office, too. He invited Ron Daley to come up and join him. Their firm was Loftus and Daley. They started doing the big jobs in town. They are known as the firm to go to for large projects. They did the courthouse, parking structure, centennial bridge, the life sciences building at UAF, the new engineering building addition, and the Museum of the North which was a challenging project. They have done all the additions to the hospital in the last fifteen years, the additions to the high schools, and the Birch Hill ski building. He said projects didn't have to go to Anchorage and Seattle. He talked about the work ethic and the know-how he learned in the firm in Seattle.

Dan asked about the work involved in structural engineering. Jim said a lot of buildings they did were unique in Fairbanks. He talked about working on the courthouse. There were five different elevator and stair towers in the buildings. They had to separate the public and prisoner spaces. They reinforced the towers and eliminated the cross bracing. The towers were built first and then the rest of the building was constructed. He talked about the construction of the parking garage and the centennial bridge. The

bridge was challenging because they didn't want a pier in the center. The bridge was launched from the piers. They cast fourteen feet at a time from each side. It was all built on hinges.

Dan asked about payment for a difficult job. Jim said they lost money on the Centennial Bridge job. Sometimes you're optimistic about how long a job will take. He talked about the unique problems of the construction of the museum building. They made it a three dimensional structure using a series of round columns and cross braces. He said the project was full of geometric challenges. Dan asked about a name for the shape of the building. Jim said it has been termed the whale or iceberg. Dan asked about geometric terms. Jim said only for the store which is a truncated cone. He said the larger piece of the museum is really a flat wall with a pure horizontal curve. The new buildings they did are the Mt. McKinley bank building which used a new type of buckling restrained braced frames. It makes efficient use of steel. They have used the technology in the engineering and life sciences buildings on campus and it hasn't been used anywhere else in Alaska.

Jim said in 1984 he started his new firm and enjoyed what he was doing. He had the opportunity to merge with other firms. In 1998 he merged with F.P.E. Rowan. They were all in the same building and he decided to do something different. He negotiated a merger with Blake and Boswell. They have been in the same building since 1998 and they have continued to grow. PDC Inc. is the name of the firm. They have about forty people in each office in Fairbanks and Anchorage. The total revenue is around 14 million dollars a year.

Dan asked about the responsibility as an engineer. Jim said you can't be a structural engineer without recognizing the responsibilities that come with designing a structure correctly. He tells his guys that they can never be wrong and they have to be right about everything they do. There can be mistakes on the design side. There has to be a system to be very thorough and careful. You check each other's work and make sure things are being done correctly.

Dan asked about having a suitable personality to be an engineer. Jim said he has had an awareness of doing things right since college days. He has a passion for structural engineering. It isn't a casual profession. You care about your structures and perfection. It is part of the whole picture. Dan said you need a commitment to work hard and a willingness to accept responsibility. He said Jim has also done that with his family. Jim said he doesn't think about it as a decision he makes every day, it is inherent. He said family comes first no matter what. He recognizes his role as a husband and a father. He hopes he did as good a job as possible. He said you do what you can, you be there, and you develop your relationships with your kids. You accept your kids for who they are. He said it is a rich and rewarding thing to do. He said they have been lucky as a family and have a tight knit bond.

Dan talked about retirement and the stress of the job and his commitment. Jim said there was always some sense that one must work long enough to have enough for retirement. He enjoyed what he was doing and it was fulfilling. He has no regrets about it at all.

Dan asked about something that happened yesterday. Jim said yesterday he went in and quit his job. He said the cancer he has made a difference in his life. The initial prediction of a cure has not happened. He said there is no need to continue working. He may have a short life to live from this point on. He said he

wants to enjoy each day as it comes. He doesn't need the distraction of a job. He has interests that he has had all along. He wants to review and study philosophy. He wanted to do some painting. He has never done anything like that in his life. He is positioned for whatever comes ahead for him.

Jim said he has always been interested in reading. Since the kids have grown up and moved up he has gotten back into reading philosophy. Six or seven years ago he began on a study of philosophers in a sequential order. He started talking with John Koostra. They set up a time during the week for discussion. He said their meetings have been thought provoking and organized how he thinks. It is coming into play now in his situation. He said it made him less self- focused.

Dan asked about leaving a message for is future grandchildren. Jim said it would be wonderful to watch grandchildren grow up and perhaps be influential on their lives. He would want them to develop an awareness of the world around them that is bigger than them and to follow the rich path of contemplation and thought. He said it would have been a joy to participate in that. Dan asked about his children. Jim said his oldest is John, the second one is Oliver, the third one is Michael, and their daughter is Claire. He complimented his children. He said he and his wife have been lucky to have their children and he has been fortunate having kids that are forthright, funny and understanding. He talked about his wife, Eileen. He said he couldn't think of anyone else that could possibly love him more or treated him better. He learned what love is from her. He considers himself lucky.