Engineers and Shoe Strings

By Greg Schindler, S.E.

As a structural engineer, you are a member of a noble and somewhat rare profession. That is – a profession that actually is involved with producing something tangible and beneficial for society. When you think about it, not that many people get to do that.

> *"I like to tell kids that there is literally nothing in their life that is not affected by engineering; from the car you drive, or the food you eat, to your toaster and wireless headphones, right down to that little plastic thing on the end of your shoe laces."*

It has been estimated that there are about 60,000 individuals involved in structural engineering in the United States. By my crude estimate, only a few hundred of those are actively involved in activities for betterment of the profession, such as participating on association committees or being involved with their local structural associations. Most engineers have no idea of the amount of volunteer work that goes on behind the scenes aimed at improving what we do and how we do it. However, those who do participate on national committees often see the same people volunteering their time for several different organizations.

I strongly urge you to consider getting more involved with your profession. The best way to do that is to get involved in your local SEA, or find ways to directly participate in SEI or CASE. Your receipt of this magazine indicates that you are already somehow connected to one of those organizations. If you are particularly interested in some aspect of structural engineering, there is certainly an organization that has an activity involved in it. Join a committee, or start one. You'll find that you will learn a lot and it will be rewarding to know that you are helping advance your chosen profession.

Another way to get involved is to volunteer to talk to school kids about structural engineering or engineering as a profession in general. These days it seems young people are less inclined to be interested in vocations that involve science, math or even physical work in the construction trades. Yet, nowadays, life is so complicated and technical. Technology is everywhere, and young people, or people in general for that matter, take it for granted. In the United States science, technology and engineering are no longer awe-inspiring. It is just so natural to listen to an mp3 player, use a laptop, or take a picture with your cell phone. Few people even think about where these devices come from or how they were developed. I like to tell kids that there is literally nothing in their life that is not affected by engineering; from the car you drive, or the food you eat, to your toaster and wireless headphones, right down to that little plastic thing on the end of your shoe laces. Everything that is man made, or that is natural but delivered by a vehicle, is made possible by design and engineering. Kids need to know more about what engineering is all about.

It is somewhat similar in our profession. We take things for granted as well. Most engineers don't have a clue about how code provisions come to be. Ever wonder why a provision in the building code says what it says? It didn't just happen. Some of those few hundred people volunteered their time to work to develop that provision. But they don't always get it right. So, get involved with helping to improve what we do and how we do it. You will find active participation in the profession can be very rewarding and educational.

And by the way. That plastic thing at the end of your shoe lace has a name. It's called an aglet. I wonder how many engineers it took to figure out how to make that thing and put it on the end of a shoe lace….▪

Greg Schindler, S.E., is an Associate in the Seattle office of KPFF Consulting Engineers. He is a past President of NCSEA and is a member of the STRUCTURE Editorial Board. Greg can be contacted at ***gregs@kpff.com****.*