

In Memoriam



Jim Delahay
1958-2005

On April 16, 2005, at approximately noon, the structural engineering community lost one of its most admired members, James Merriam Delahay. Jim died just one month short of his 47th birthday, while working outside at his home in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, a suburb of Birmingham. He left behind his wife of 25 years, Linda, his two sons, William 11 and Matthew 9, and literally thousands of friends, as evidenced by the outpouring of sympathy.

The incredible number of people who expressed their sympathy, whether in person, through email, or by phone, makes you realize just how special this man really was and the impression he left wherever he went. People came from across the country, waiting for hours to say goodbye and to let his family know how important he was to them. Jim genuinely loved people and let them know it. His magnetism and energy combined with an extraordinary interest in, and the ability to master, the technical, made him unique. He was an excellent engineer, a talented businessman, and a credit to our profession. His life was a never ending string of leadership roles and contributions to the causes dear to him, whether it was business or personal.

I became personally acquainted with Jim through our participation in CASE/Alabama, forerunner to the Structural Engineers Association of Alabama. It was during those early years that Jim decided it was important for practicing structural engineers to participate in the development of the structural sections of the Southern Standard Building Code. He started working with the Southern Standard Building Code Congress in 1991, much like his father had done while Jim was growing up. His area of interest was wind; and it was not long before he started a long and successful career working with wind codes and standards, later serving on ASCE 7 and the IBC Structural Committee. Jim brought a different perspective to Code authorship. As a partner in his firm and a practicing engineer, he valued simplicity and the sharing of knowledge. He worked to accomplish the adoption of the simplified method for wind analysis used in current codes, coauthored numerous articles as well as a book on wind, and he lectured. His PowerPoint® presentations became the benchmark by which all seminars were judged.

Jim was not only one of the most engaging people I ever met, but also the best speaker I ever heard. He could take the dull and boring and make it interesting. All he needed was a laptop computer and a projector to be in his element. As a lecturer on wind, his schedule was filled with speaking engagements. He would have made a great teacher because he loved to share what he knew, whether it was with a group of structural engineers looking for professional development hours or Boy Scouts earning merit badges.

Jim's effectiveness as a leader was recognized not only in his business affiliation, but also in his professional affiliations. He was one of three practicing engineers to join the 16 person International Building Code Structural Committee. Within two years, he was voted chair. He had a unique ability to speak the language of both the practitioner and the researcher. Many times in Jim's seminars, you would hear him explain some obscure, complex aspect of wind research, only to say



at the end "Ya'll don't need to worry about that." And I think we took him at his word.

When the NCSEA Code Advisory Committee (CAC) needed fresh leadership, NCSEA tapped Jim to become chair. Jim approached his new position with enthusiasm and quickly got the CAC on track. He knew how to lead, and he did so in large measure by example. He was convinced that NCSEA had the privilege and the responsibility to use its vast technical resources for the betterment of the profession; and he dedicated much of his professional life to that cause. When the time came to appoint a new liaison to the Applied Technology Council (ATC), NCSEA asked Jim. At the time of his death, Jim was President of the ATC Board of Directors and had been instrumental in developing ATC-45, a companion manual to ATC-20. Everyone knows you never let a franchise player rest.

Jim was born in Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, and attended the University of Alabama where he received a bachelor's degree and master's degree in civil engineering. He was the son of an architect who married Jim's mother while stationed in England during World War II. Jim was a true Southern Gentleman, proud of his profession, his family, and his friends, and loyal to them all. He was a strong supporter of the University of Alabama College of Engineering and served on its Leadership Board. In 2003, the University of Alabama College of Engineering recognized Jim as a Distinguished Fellow for his professional achievements.

Jim started and ended his engineering career with the same firm, Lane/Bishop/Hodnett, Inc. The firm was renamed Lane/Bishop/York/Delahay with the addition of Jim and partner Dale York in 1987, and became LBYD, Inc. as the firm continued to grow. Jim was described by the senior partner, Glenn Bishop, as the glue that held the firm together and was instrumental in the firm's rapid growth, taking over as President and CEO in 1999. Jim's project list as an engineer was impressive; however, his real legacy is measured by the number of friends, colleagues, and associates who will miss him and not allow him to be forgotten.

As the rest of us continue with our lives, we should remember Jim, his family, and how he so unselfishly gave of himself to our profession. The Jim Delahays of the world are few and far between. They transform jobs into professions, replace problems with solutions, and show us all how it's done with class. When we are lucky enough to have and know people like Jim, we need to cherish them, support them in their endeavors, and make sure they and their families understand just how much they are appreciated, for it's the Jim Delahays of the world that make everything and everyone they touch a little better for it.

Jim's enormous zest for life could not overcome his predisposition for an early death. Like his father and mother, Jim died young. His wife Linda explained his death to me by saying "His heart was just too big." I think most of us, who were lucky enough to know Jim, would agree. His absence will be felt by those who worked with him; and his memory will remain forever in our minds and our hearts. He was our guy and we all miss him. ■

Marc S. Barter, P.E., S.E.

The Structural Engineers Association of Alabama announces the creation and nonprofit incorporation of the *James Merriam Delahay Foundation*. Those interested in contributing to the Foundation can find additional information at www.seaool.com.