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NWFTA: The Power of Many by Libby Maurer with Jack Louws & Roy Schiferl

Grassroots in its purist form lies in the work of a local chapter. How has NWFTA endured the many challenges of being WTCA's first chapter?

The Northwest Truss Fabricators Association (NWTFa) has been around for a long time. In fact, NWTFa was the first ever component manufacturer association chapter. Its (grass) roots date back to the 1960s when the truss industry was still young and wood components were just beginning to emerge as a new building material. The scope of NWTFa's work—both as a chapter representing area component manufacturers and as an organization working for the advancement of the component manufacturing industry as a whole—has changed with the times. Perhaps it is their ability to adapt to change that has helped the chapter to become so oriented with grassroots involvement, activism and people power over the past four decades. NWTFa veterans Jack Louws (JL) of Louws Truss and Roy Schiferl (RS) of Woodinville Lumber recently talked to SBC staff about their history of grassroots involvement with the chapter.

SBC: What year was the chapter started? Were either of you involved in its inception?

RS: It started in 1966 as the Western Washington Truss Fabricators Council (WWTFC). There was a group of about five truss plants in the area that all needed third party inspections. The industry was still so young at that time and there was no one to perform these inspections. They said, "let's hire an engineer with Western Washington Truss Fabricators Council (WWTFC) to perform inspections."

I became involved with WWTFC in 1970, and at the time it was still pretty much an inspection agency. We were the teeth behind the inspection process. We had quarterly meetings, where we talked about more technical issues than we do today. We were there to serve a purpose, not to bond for fraternal reasons. We were there for the building officials.

JL: I took over [Louws Truss] in the early 1980s. I was actually planning to get out of the business. I went to Seattle to sell the truss plant, and instead was urged to come to a chapter meeting. 1983 was when I started attending meetings. I first took on board responsibilities in 1987.

SBC: What led up to the transformation of the chapter to what it is today: NWTFa?

RS: What spurred the change in the organization was a truss collapse in a drug store, where WWTFC had inspected the trusses. A lawsuit was ultimately filed as well. I think the lawsuit was a real wake-up call for a lot of us, especially myself. At that time, we decided to formalize the structure of the association by involving an attorney to help incorporate and organize the

organization. We also determined from a business perspective that it was best that we not do inspections and in that regard, we convinced TPI to be the inspection agency. At that point, we started to become a more fraternal group. Our priorities and scope shifted at that time, too. Our focus became grassroots education in the marketplace about our products.

In the early to late 1990s, our priorities shifted again, although this time not as dramatically. Again, we focused on outreach activities that benefited the good of the industry. During this time, we spent most of our time devoted to educating building and code officials in the marketplace on trusses and bracing. Most recently, we have been dealing with regional code interpretation issues.

I think there is some credibility in being a member of NWTFA that stems back to the original organization. Our history as WWTFCA gives us the ability to deal with regional issues and gives us the clout to go in and request meetings to discuss issues with them. People know and respect our chapter; I think that's unique in this industry.

SBC: What have you found to be the most fulfilling about your involvement in the chapter? Strength in numbers? Camaraderie?

RS: Absolutely—we have tried to solve problems as individuals, but I don't think there's ever been a time when we couldn't solve them better, faster, or with less of a struggle as a team. The main reason for this is that we are highly respected in the community because of our history and the progress we've made together. We've always acted professionally when faced with adversity. Because of that, people know who we are and are willing to work with us.

SBC: What is it about the group's infrastructure that makes it work for everyone involved?

JL: NWTFA is unique from most chapters in that the board alone makes all decisions. This gives us the flexibility to make crucial decisions without having to call a meeting with the entire membership. Most chapters take things to their members for voting. Also, we are very cautious about who becomes elected to the chapter board. There is an understanding among us that this is a very serious commitment and some specific knowledge and experience is required. For instance, one of the biggest issues we deal with is codes and, for this reason, you have to be able to understand the code side to serve on the board of this chapter. Codes are ultimately there to serve a purpose; it is your task to dig down and find the root of the code official's concern. Then you rework the code and build the issue back up until it makes sense for all involved. This situation requires somewhat of a diplomat or negotiator to work with both sides of the issue.

Because of our ability to allow the board to make crucial decisions, our membership holds the utmost respect and trust for the board. Therefore, membership has always been very high. Participation has never been a problem for NWTFA; currently we are 18 fabricators and 13 associate members strong.

SBC: How is it that you are competitors by day, but are also able to convene as colleagues working for a common cause?

RS: We are good friends. Jack's my best friend by far in this industry. How is it that we have that closeness yet still are competitors? We leave our egos at the door. Because we are competitors, we want to solve issues that may come to impact someone else down the road. There's no room for egos when we're faced with a problem. That's the way we work as a chapter. We were brought together with a common goal in the beginning with the need for inspection. Our relationships have grown out of that need and I know that the whole organization will step in and help out. We all have the confidence that we can compete on one level and help on another.

JL: Another part of this reaches far beyond putting our egos aside to make this organization work. I realize that if my competitor is confronted with a code interpretation issue, for example, working together to help them out on a united front will benefit us all in the end. It's easy to see that if these fires aren't put out by the group in a timely manner, they're going to come roaring back, and who knows who will be the next victim?

SBC: What has been the most significant issue to date that the chapter has been confronted with?

JL: The trucking issue of 1999—we took it from one fabricator's issue to something that has helped us on a statewide level. We all know that trusses are bulky and hard to move down the highway. But the rules we were expected to comply with were archaic at best. For us to be able to work with Washington State DOT to change the rules was monumental. We did it with the utmost professionalism by inviting DOT members to the May 1999 NWTFA general membership meeting. Representatives from the DOT agreed that the interpretation of the laws involved in the dispute as they applied to trusses did not make much sense. One lady (Pam Hughley of WSDOT) even rode around in a truck all day to observe deliveries. In the end, the DOT was highly cooperative and helpful in offering to support the association as best they could.

Now I have confidence in shipping trusses to a jurisdiction that is in the farthest corridor that the NWTFA members represent, because I am privy to all the code interpretations. Without the chapter there to gather the information, it can take many more phone calls and much more legwork in order to move product. So there is a huge incentive there for us to keep involved in the organization. It is very rare that we have to deal with code interpretation fragmentation.

There have been plenty of other issues to tackle. There was also that issue in September of last year involving the Structural Engineers Association of Washington (SEAW), who had taken issue with wood truss design responsibilities. Published in one of their newsletters, SEAW cited a recognized gap between what services the building designer or engineer of record assumes they are getting from the truss manufacturer/truss engineer and what is actually being provided. Comments made following that article suggested that not only should the truss design engineer have a complete set of construction drawings in hand to properly review truss designs, s/he should also be responsible for all bracing (temporary and permanent) and the design of all framing members tying into the truss system. With the help of WTCA-National, we were able to effectively deal with this issue.

SBC: What would you say to encourage others to start or join their local chapters?

JL: It's extremely important to become involved with a chapter. The group lends a certain legitimacy to the cause because all are inherently involved with the direction of the whole industry. It is almost a matter of selfishness if you aren't involved on a regional level. For example, I know for a fact that you can't solve all code issues by yourself. Without the group rallying behind, we just can't accomplish it on our own.

RS: The power of many. Essentially what that means is, banded together as one, we can do anything. Most chapters are formed out of one specific need, maybe even a crisis. After the fact, I think many people come to realize the chapter can make a difference. And we (members of NWTFA) probably take that for granted. We are very fortunate to be such a well-established and well-respected group.

Are there code or other technical issues weighing on your mind and your business? Do you need more information about a WTCA Chapter in your area? Is there a need to start a chapter in your state or region? The power of many could be just a phone call or mouse click away. For more information about WTCA Chapters, contact wtca@woodtruss.com.

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

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