



# A Senator, Firefighters & a Chapter: The ITMA Mission



by Libby Maurer

One chapter's commitment to education reveals its grassroots philosophy.

**T**he grass in Iowa only grows for a portion of the year. Thankfully the Iowa Truss Manufacturers Association (ITMA), a chapter of WTCA, more than makes up for the lack of greenery through its year-round grassroots educational efforts.

It's a below-zero February day in Cascade, IA, where members of ITMA have gathered to host one of many outreach events. The wind is fierce, and there are warnings of frostbite if your skin is over-exposed. But these conditions do not stop ITMA from meeting with one of its closest allies: state Senator Tom Hancock.

Hancock arrives at Cascade Mfg Co. to tour the facility. It's no wonder he is unfazed by the brutal conditions; he was once a U.S. postal service employee. With all the collaboration he and ITMA have had in the last few years, it's hard to believe he's never seen the inside of a truss plant (see photo spread following article). The story of how they connected is grassroots to the core.

### An Unlikely Connection

A "conservative democrat" from Epworth, IA, the senator's second career is with the volunteer fire service (Epworth Fire Department), which is ultimately how he came to know ITMA. The initial connection between Hancock and ITMA is a man named Al Esch, also a volunteer firefighter—and ITMA member

Al says he first met Hancock through the Iowa Firemen's Association at a time when Hancock served as the organization's president. (This was well before he ran for state office.) Years later, Al was contacted by Hancock to give a presentation about a topic he happened to know a lot about: the fire performance of wood trusses. "[Hancock] knew that I was involved in the wood truss industry, and he knew we shared a common interest in firefighter safety and education."

But long before the chapter spread its message to the fire service, its efforts were focused in a very different area.

### Inspired to Make a Difference

When the chapter was young (it was incepted in the early 1990s), trusses were becoming more and more prevalent in Iowa markets, which meant business was good for the component manufacturers of ITMA. Longtime ITMA Education Committee Chair Ray Noonan Jr. remembers there was also an increase in jobsite injuries during this time, and no education for the installers. "So we formed an education committee," he says.



### Taking the Show on the Road

Since 2003, ITMA has taken its Fire Performance of Wood Trusses show on the road. Here's who they've reached with their grassroots teamwork.

- Tri-State Fire Association at the NICC campus in Peosta
- Marshalltown Fire Dept (career)
- Ames Winter Fire School (career and volunteer)
- Iowa Lakes Fire School (career and volunteer)
- Cascade Fire Dept (volunteer)
- Solon Fire Dept (volunteer)
- Bernard Fire Dept (volunteer)
- Dubuque Fire Dept

**Coming in 2007:**

- Monticello Fire Dept (volunteer)
- Test burn with the Ames Fire School (tentatively scheduled for late summer)

The committee used Truss Technology Workshops (TTWs), a multi-media resource from WTCA, to aid in their presentations targeting different builder and inspector groups throughout the state. For more than five years, Ray Jr. contacted every HBA, community college and junior college in the state, inviting them to schedule a free presentation to be given by ITMA. Over the course of several years, the chapter has talked to upwards of 20 groups about industry-recommended jobsite safety guidelines.

What a difference their team effort has made to encourage safety on the jobsite. "More than a decade later, the chapter agrees that the occurrence of fall-downs has decreased dramatically in proportion to the number of trusses installed. So we definitely made an impact," Ray Jr. states. They can say this with relative certainty because for years he has kept records about fall-down incidents in the state.

### The Pendulum Swings

ITMA was so persistent in its pursuit of jobsite education that the Education Committee literally ran out of local builder conferences to attend. It was the perfect time for a firefighter/senator to call.

Ray Jr. remembers that early in 2003 the fire service was making waves about component fire performance. "Some of the fire service gurus were being fairly denigrating about our products in a very public way." Simultaneously, WTCA and Hancock—now a state senator—were encouraging ITMA to get involved and defend the industry. That's when Hancock contacted his fire service acquaintance Al Esch, encouraging him to reach out to members of the Iowa fire service.

It just so happened that the Carbeck Structural Components Institute (CSCI) had released a presentation called *The Fire*

*Performance of Wood Trusses (FPoWT)* in 2002, which became a valuable resource for ITMA as it forged a path into fire houses and training schools across the state.

### Firefighter Hancock Becomes a Senator

By this time, firefighter Hancock had become Senator Hancock. But his new role in state government did not keep him far from the fire service or ITMA events. If anything, he became more of a resource to the chapter than ever before.

This was especially apparent in spring 2004 when WTCA staff informed Ray Jr. of a state fire and building code committee that had no representation from the build-

ing component or lumber and building material industries. This meant the chapter would not be allowed to observe or comment during the hearings. At its annual legislative chapter meeting that March, ITMA approached Hancock about what he could do to help. "After the meeting, Hancock returned to the Hill, and by the end of the day he had drafted an amendment that named members of ITMA 'legitimate persons of interest' with respect to this committee," he says. The amendment was passed shortly thereafter, and ITMA has been represented at each state fire advisory committee since.

During this time, Hancock also introduced Al to some people the senator knew in the Iowa Fire Service Training Bureau. "Because of his former life as a firefighter, he was able to interface for us within the training bureau," says Ray Jr. These connections helped spawn some regional fire service training sessions, as well as another very important connection for ITMA. Ray Jr. says Hancock's urging caused Al to join the Education Committee. Soon Al had offered to head up fire service education and outreach for the chapter.

### One Thing Leads to Another

"I have great admiration for Al because of his passion for educating firefighters," says Ray Jr. As an 11-year firefighter with the Dyersville Fire Department, Al's passion is fueled by the inaccurate information given to firefighters. ITMA member Andy Green has also played a key role in making connections within the Iowa fire service based on his own work in the service. About three years ago, Andy became a volunteer with the Cascade Fire Department at the urging of his brother. "I enjoy it more than I imagined I would. Being able to help someone out when they're in danger is really important to me."

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## A Senator, Firefighters & a Chapter...

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Because of their experience in the component manufacturing industry, Al and Andy are fully dedicated to sharing the facts about trusses and components to their brothers and sisters in the fire service. That might explain why they've been contacted by numerous Iowa fire departments to give classes on The Fire Performance of Wood Trusses in the last few years (see sidebar on page 31). Most recently, they were invited to speak to the Solon Fire Department, at the request of firefighter Denny Hansen.

Also a field staff instructor for the Iowa Fire Service Training Bureau, Denny enthusiastically welcomed the ITMA representatives' information about fire performance. "This type of education is so important to us that we videotaped it for those that couldn't be there. There was a lot of good information in it. It was interesting to see how [components] are engineered and built," he said of the January 22 event. In conjunction with the training session, ITMA also hosted a plant tour for Solon (see photo spread).

Denny explained that his experience working in the Iowa fire service has taught him why getting information from our industry (like that contained in *The Fire Performance of Wood Trusses*) is so important. "All we've ever been taught is that gusset plates will pop off and that all truss construction

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—Denny Hansen, Solon Fire Dept. Captain

will fail under fire conditions," he says. He has done a lot of research in the last few months about those claims, which he now thinks are unfounded and not necessarily backed by hard evidence. This is thanks to the information presented by Al and Andy.

Andy says he can see that Denny is passionate about getting—and teaching—accurate information about how trusses perform when exposed to fire. "He's a state [fire] instructor, and I think he feels it's his duty to make sure he's passing along the facts."

### Keeping the Faith

Andy and Al may be volunteer firefighters, but they remain loyal to the building components industry nonetheless. For Andy, hearing firsthand the negativity about trusses has been an eye-opening process. "When I was doing my basic training, I heard the same things everyone hears. They aren't quiet

about it; the perception that trusses are bad is out there." He has adopted a delicate patience for the education process ITMA has undertaken. "It's going to take time to reverse what [firefighters] have been taught," he says.

There's no doubt in Al's mind that their membership in ITMA helps build trust. "I certainly think it gives us more credibility when defending component construction," he says.

Rick Parrino of ITMA acknowledges his chapter is new to the world of fire education. "But what makes the most sense about working with the Iowa volunteer fire service," he says, "is that many of them work in lumberyards or are construction guys by trade." Rick thinks they may be the best audience to start with.

For Denny, the opportunity to build upon his new relationship with ITMA is a chance to digest more facts about truss performance in fire conditions. Although no date has been solidified, Denny and ITMA are currently planning some live demo burns. "We're looking forward to working with him in the very near future," says Al. The chapter also hopes Denny's connections with the Iowa Fire Service Training Bureau will yield future trainings and give them the opportunity to take their message to the state level.

### Nowhere But Up

Ray Jr. sees the process ITMA is taking to spread the industry's message about fire performance leading to the same place that their TTW work went several years ago. "We don't have the same jobsite safety issues, installation, bracing and call-backs because of [our efforts to connect with builders through TTWs]. I see the same thing happening with the FPoWTs."

In a full circle fashion that often defines grassroots activities, ITMA refers back to Hancock, who has been front and center through it all. He believes if the goal is to continue teaching the marketplace about its products, the chapter is on the right path. "Feedback from the fire service about ITMA's outreach and educational efforts has been nothing but positive," he reports. ITMA is grateful for Hancock's assistance both within the fire service and as a state lawmaker. "He has pushed us legislatively and educationally. He's been a big ear for us," Ray Jr. reports.

Hancock is impressed with ITMA's strides. "ITMA has the opportunity to make a big impact in the Midwest with the contacts they have," he says. "The more I think about this, the more excited I get about what's ahead." **SBC**



Don't miss the photo spreads of both the Solon Fire Department tour and Senator Hancock's visit to Cascade Mfg Co on pages 34, 36 and 38. For more information about conducting a plant tour for your legislator or fire department, contact WTCA staff at 608/274-4849.

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—Andy Green, Volunteer Firefighter & Design Dept Manager for Cascade Mfg Co



Roy McDonnell from Cascade's Dispatch department explains the job scheduling process to members of the Solon Fire Department.



Andy Green demonstrates truss design software to Denny Hansen and Rick Childs of Solon.



Mike Gassman shows Brian Platz what a truss design drawing looks like.



Gary Wuchter of Cascade takes members of Solon through the automated component saw cutting screen.



Gary Wuchter explains how wood is fed through the saw.



Gary Wuchter demonstrates the speed and efficiency of a new linear feed saw to Solon.

Continued on page 36

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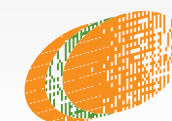
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**"Feedback from the fire service about ITMA's outreach and educational efforts has been nothing but positive."**

—Firefighter & Iowa State Senator Tom Hancock



Iowa State Senator Tom Hancock is greeted by ITMA Education Committee Chair Ray Noonan Jr.



Ray Noonan gives Senator Hancock materials and statistics about the building components industry nationally and in Iowa.



Andy Green thanks Senator Hancock for helping ITMA make connections with the Iowa fire service.



The Senator asks whether the industry has benefited from rebuilding in the areas affected by Katrina, and how the housing slump of 2006 has impacted orders.



Rick Parrino explains the flow of materials from the saws to the tables to the roller presses and finally outside for staging and loading.



Ray Jr. talks about the environmental benefits of building components, especially the reduction of jobsite waste and the ability to grind and re-sell scrap.

Continued on page 38

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**"We don't have the same jobsite safety issues, installation, bracing and call-backs because of [our efforts to connect with builders through TTWs]. I see the same thing happening with the Fire Performance of Wood Trusses."**

—Ray Noonan Jr., ITMA Education Committee Chair & President of Cascade Mfg Co



Senator Hancock examines a metal connector plate.



Green, Hancock and Parrino talk about the teeth of connector plates. Green and Parrino explain that the plates they are holding don't require nails.



Tim Noonan and Senator Hancock examine double sheared screws in the steel shop.



Ray Jr. demonstrates how screws are fastened into the heel of a steel truss.



Senator Hancock sits down with ITMA members after the tours to discuss recent Iowa state legislation and business initiatives.



Hancock, Parrino and Green discuss the next phase of ITMA's training crusade: the Iowa fire service.

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