

# Fond Farewells

The SBC industry bids a fond farewell to two of its most enthusiastic and involved leaders.

**A**ndy Schwitter entered the structural building components industry in 1991 as CEO of Truswal in Arlington, TX, and immediately made an impression. Though he started at Truswal "cold" (with no prior industry experience), he brought him with common sense and a no-nonsense, can-do attitude that had quite an effect on his employees and customers.

Schwitter retired at the end of June 2007, but his associates and customers (some of whom became close personal friends) say his contributions to the company and the industry have outlasted his daily presence there.

Val Cairns, marketing director at ITW Building Components Group (which purchased Truswal a few years ago), said Schwitter initially familiarized himself with the industry by traveling all over the country and meeting customers. He memorized their names and their needs, and used that information to forge relationships and cooperation, allowing him to better meet and exceed customers' expectations.

"He always knew what was going on in the industry, in the steel markets, all over the world," Cairns said. "He is a very sharp businessman."

According to Merle Nett, president of Richco Structures, Schwitter was hired to turn a then-struggling Truswal around—a task he fully succeeded in. Nett, who was a customer of Schwitter's and is a close personal friend, said a big part of that success was due to Schwitter's focus on Truswal's software. He developed a few different users groups to assess the software and help improve it. The group members would gather, with Schwitter encouraging everyone to speak frankly about what was good and what was bad. He would then guide the adjustment process based on the information he'd gathered.

"After a while, it became pretty apparent that he was willing to walk the walk and get things accomplished," Nett said.

Nett also said that Schwitter is a savvy businessman who demands respect and gets results. "He literally turned Truswal from a struggling company to a very profitable company," Nett said. "He got a solid team of managers to head up his various divisions, and the company became very successful."

## Caring for Customers & Employees

Schwitter's commitment to customer service was a big factor in his and the company's success. "He believed strongly in outstanding customer service," Cairns said. "It didn't matter if it was a small or large customer, he believed in good customer service. He would listen to them and address their concerns."

In fact, many of Schwitter's associates speak of his people skills and dedication to service. Antonio Justice, vice president and general manager at ITW, worked with Schwitter almost the entire time Schwitter was at Truswal. Justice said the relationships Schwitter formed with customers were so solid that he and other employees were sometimes invited to stay in customers' homes when in town. Also, employees were often dinner guests at Schwitter's house and would then return the favor.

"He was a very good guy in the office and outside the office," Justice said. "Very family-oriented and really got very involved—not only with the customers but also with the employees, which of course led to his success at Truswal."

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## Entered Cold, Exited Warmly

by Marisa Hirsch



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Dick Riegle, technical support manager at ITW, said a big part of what made Schwitter such a great person to work for and with was his open-door policy. "No matter what it was, you could talk to him about it, and that just worked very, very well," he said. "I've never worked for anybody any better than Andy, and that will be hard to beat."

Cairns also mentioned Schwitter's open-door policy, as well as his leadership and motivational abilities. "Concerning Andy's leadership, he always gave credit to the employees for the success of the company and empowered us to do our jobs," she said. "He had an open-door policy, he knew how to boost morale, and...he took a personal interest in all of us."

Justice said Schwitter was a mentor to him and a great boss to work with for several reasons, among them that he was a hard worker and a fair boss. "If there was a mistake, there wasn't screaming or yelling," said Justice. "We did have heated arguments, but there was always a meeting and agreements were always made."

Roger Gibbs, president of SpaceJoist TE and WTCA past president, took note of Schwitter's company leadership and communication skills even though he never worked for him.

"I liked the way that he treated his staff at Truswal—from the VPs to the clerical [employees]," said Gibbs, who has known Schwitter since 1991. Gibbs said Schwitter made it clear to employees that they could always approach him and that they were all important to the company.

Additionally, Gibbs said that if a Truswal employee was struggling in his or her position, that employee wasn't let go. Instead, Schwitter would find where that person's abilities would be better suited. "There was always a place in the company where your strengths would come out and you would be an asset," said Gibbs. "Andy identified that place."

### Extensive Contributions & Character

Kirk Grundahl, WTCA executive director, said that he and Schwitter's relationship developed somewhat around the fact that Grundahl's company, Qualtim, Inc., took on the management of WTCA at the same time that Schwitter entered the industry.

"Andy was a breath of fresh air because he brought a perspective that was from the outside looking in, and that is always very valuable," Grundahl said. "Andy really took an interest in his customers' association and we had great conversations. But, beyond that, he invited us into the Truswal family. He made us feel like a valuable part of Truswal and WTCA a valuable part of our industry."

Grundahl also said that the initial communication with Schwitter—the friendship and sharing of industry-related information and perspectives—laid a great foundation for a variety

of WTCA activities that were positive for the whole industry. "Personally, I am really glad to be able to say that Andy was a colleague on a fascinating journey and a friend," he said.

Several people who worked with Schwitter in different ways over the years speak of him, and his support of WTCA and the industry, with high regard. Tim Rouch, president of Gang-Nail Truss of Visalia in Visalia, CA, said he will always be grateful for Schwitter's support of WTCA. "Our organization could never have achieved its current level of success without the kind of support Truswal provided," he said.

"[Andy's] keen understanding and vision produced positive results for Truswal and opened new doors for the component industry," said Carl Schoening, consultant at Trusstar Consulting in Euless, TX, and prior VP of Sales at Truswal.

Nett said that among Schwitter's contributions to the industry as a whole was his part in bringing the Truss Plate Institute (TPI) and WTCA together. When the two associations began collaborating, there was a certain amount of communication and meshing of agendas that had to take place. Along the way, there were some challenging conversations. Nett gives Schwitter credit for diffusing some of the problems and getting the two boards to work together. "I think he was one of the real key people that helped accomplish that goal," Nett said.

Dan Holland, president of Clearspan Components in Meridian, MS, also gave credit to Schwitter for the cooperation between TPI and WTCA. "[Andy] was a huge factor in bringing about the cooperative spirit that WTCA and TPI now enjoy," he said.

Gibbs said that Schwitter's ability to listen and offer succinct solutions were key factors in establishing this cooperative spirit, and that Schwitter's talent for listening was greatly appreciated by manufacturers. "They had an ear they could tell things to, and I think that's what they liked," said Gibbs. "That's a big thing he (Schwitter) brought to the table."

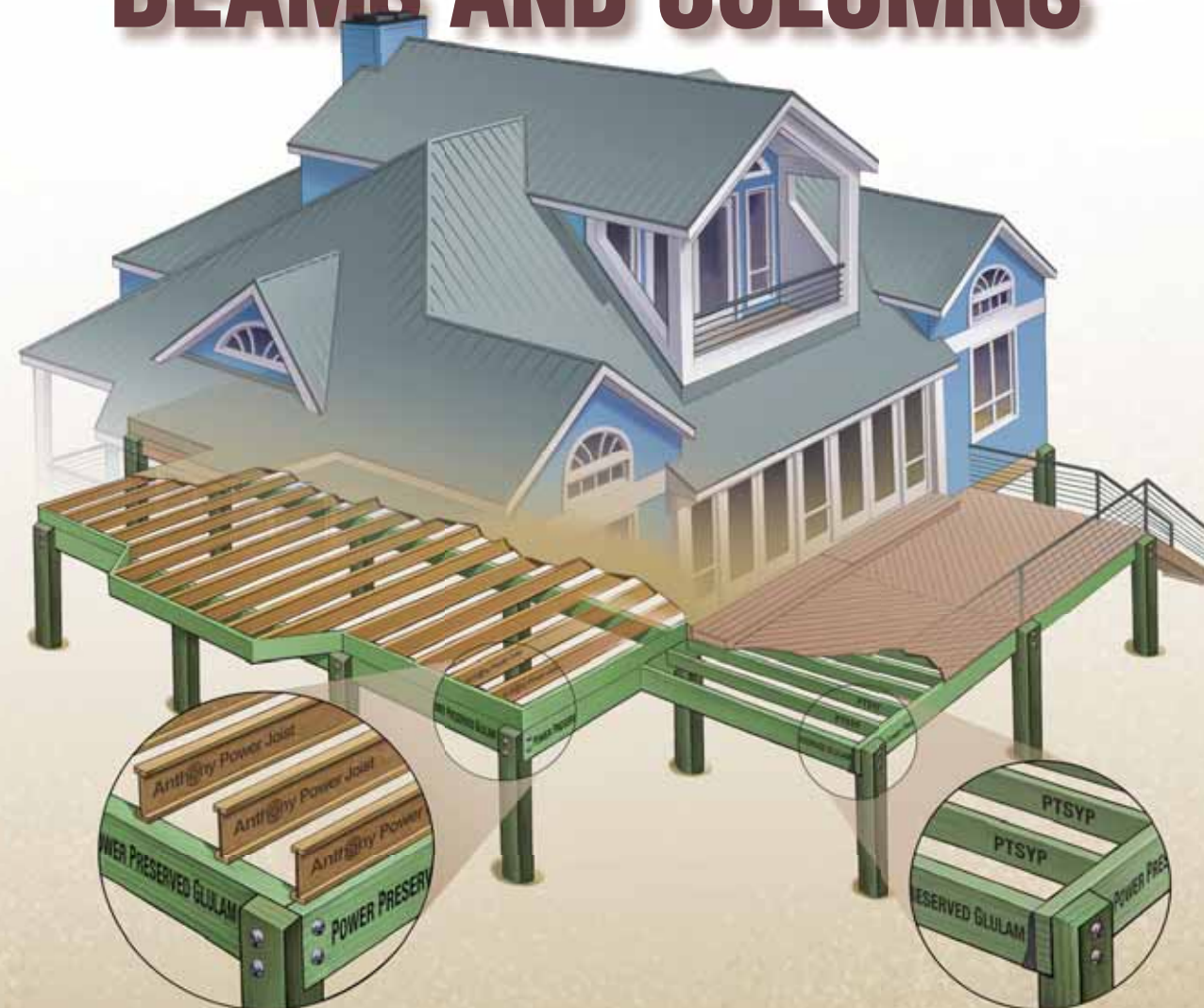
In fact, Gibbs said that Schwitter's talents for listening and speaking sometimes eliminated the need for mediation. He would listen to everyone's points of view, gather all the information and then offer his suggestions.

"So when he did speak, when he did give his viewpoint, he was very articulate about it and he always gave more than one option for the solution to a problem," Gibbs said. "He helped people think about both of those options and how they would work for them and for the industry."

When trying to explain what Schwitter is like, Justice called up an old saying. "What's the saying...?," he asked. "Character counts even when no one is looking. That's Andy to the core."

On behalf of the entire structural building components industry, *SBC Magazine* thanks Andy for his many years of leadership and energy. Best wishes for a healthy and productive retirement, Andy! **SBC**

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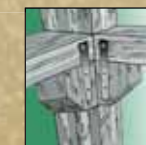
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