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Three more enshrined in construction hall of fame

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Two of them worked on the tallest building in Seattle and the third had the privilege of fulfilling lofty dreams of future construction workers.

Those high aspirations have landed Gordon Cochran, Gerald Hermanson and Sandra Olson-Meyer into the University of Washington's Construction Industry Hall of Fame.

The hall of fame was established in 1995 by the university's Department of Construction Management to honor individuals who have made significant contributions throughout their careers to the construction industry, construction education and community service.

Gordon Cochran

Gordon Cochran got an early start in the electrical contracting business: He worked at his father and brother's newly opened electrical contracting business while still in high school. Going to work required that he start school at 6 a.m. and get off at noon.

Cochran worked as an electrical apprentice from 1955 to 1957 and then graduated from high school. After school, he enlisted in the military for six months of service and eight years of reserves.

"That was the 1950s, everything was just moving," he said about the booming industrial sector following the Korean War.

In the Seattle area, the 1950s and 60s brought about modern high-rise buildings, an expansion of Boeing's operations and the start of fast-track construction schedules, according to Cochran.

Cochran said he helped IBM develop a computer program for fast-tracking a Boeing construction project during that era.

After a few years at Cochran Electric, now Cochran Inc., Gordon Cochran moved into estimating. By 1980 he found himself running the company as president.

In the 1980s, Cochran's firm worked on one of its most challenging projects: what is now the Columbia Center. He said they had to have good scheduling and a team work effort in a building that tall on a tight downtown site. The firm did the electrical systems for the shell and core, and later did the same for tenant build outs.

Cochran said another challenging project his company worked on was CenturyLink Field, which was built by Turner Construction. He said Paul Allen mandated that the project be a team effort, where everyone had a shared responsibility to get it finished on time and under budget.

"We actually finished early and way under budget," he said.

Cochran spent 55 years in electrical contracting before retiring about two years ago. He still remains on the company's board, and his daughter, LeeAnn Cochran, runs the operation along with Bill Doran. Other family members in the business include his nephew, Mike Cochran, and



Cochran

Mike's son, Ryan.

Cochran had this advice for those wanting to open a construction business: "Start small and grow gradually. I see so many firms think that the big work is where the money is, and they're gone in a year."

One thing that Cochran said he learned over the years as a subcontractor is to watch out for customers who don't pay. He learned that lesson while working in Oregon on a \$3 million subcontract that was changed so much during construction that the final tab doubled. The general contractor ended up paying him only \$4 million.

He said he didn't go to court over the \$2 million shortage because banks don't want to fund you if you're fighting a large corporation. "When you're a subcontractor, you can't hold out very long."

Cochran said that same general contractor shorted a couple of his associates, causing them to go out of business.

Cochran served for 30 years as a board member of the Puget Sound Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association. He also supports industry education programs and has a long record of community service.

In his spare time, he works on classic cars. His current project is a 1932 V-16 Cadillac that he has owned for nearly 30 years. He also owns 10 other cars.

Sandra Olson-Meyer

Sandra Olson-Meyer has the distinction of being the first woman to be inducted into the Construction Hall of Fame.

"I was so overwhelmed when (UW professor) John (Schaufelberger) called me," she said. "I have goose bumps about it. I never gave it a thought that I would be considered. I am very honored."

Olson-Meyer served for 23 years as executive director, and later president/CEO, of the Construction Industry Training Council of Washington. She also participated in national craft training committees of the Associated Builders and Contractors, Associated General Contractors of America, and the National Center for Construction Education and Research.



Olson-Meyer

She got her initial taste of construction through her late first husband, Mike Olson, who was majoring in construction management at the UW. She helped him with some of his projects and became familiar with the industry. "It was very fascinating," she said.

Mike became a vice president at George Sollitt Construction in the mid-1970s, and Olson-Meyer was asked to manage the office under a job-share plan.

Six years later, the couple started their own construction firm called MDO Group. Olson-Meyer said she was responsible for taking in bids and other office work. She occasionally visited job sites, where men would give her looks that she described as "What are you doing here?"

They operated MDO until 1991, when Mike went into consulting and Olson-Meyer looked for another challenge. "I needed to make a change and needed to do something different," she said.

Olson-Meyer can trace her link to CITC back to 1986, when Mike served as ABC's president. That's where she got to know Kathleen Garrity, who still heads up that organization. Garrity asked Olson-Meyer to hold down the office for a week while she was in Washington, D.C.

CITC's offices were down the hall from ABC's, and Olson-Meyer got to know the guy running CITC and later worked for him. She said she made some recommendations to a few CITC board members on how to more efficiently run the nonprofit. The board later let the CITC head go and asked Olson-Meyer to stay on while it searched for a replacement.

The board never conducted that search; it hired her instead.

Olson-Meyer said she wasn't sure if that was what she wanted to do, until she saw the graduation program and how overwhelmed with pride the graduates and their families were. "They got me," she said.

When Olson-Meyer took over the CITC, construction was a male-dominated industry. "That was a barrier and it was hard for a lot of men to accept that we were in their world," she said.

But, she earned their respect and soon they were seeking her opinion on various matters.

Although she ran the CITC for more than two decades, Olson-Meyer didn't get on the CITC board until 2006. She was its first woman member.

Through her persistence, the CITC became the first organization in the country in which multiple competing associations came together to create a craft training program.

One of her biggest moments was getting CITC's open-shop training approved by the state Apprenticeship and Training Council as a certified apprenticeship program. That effort took more than a decade due to court challenges from competing union programs.

CITC also went through a lengthy process to receive accreditation from the National Center for Construction Education and Research.

Olson-Meyer said she is most proud of the percentage of students that have graduated from CITC and their ensuing success. "It's always been about the students," she said.

Olson-Meyer stepped down from CITC about two years ago but still serves on the board. She said she misses interacting with people and sharing ideas but doesn't miss the long work days and the court battles.

She also serves on the local Rotary board and has worked on committees focusing on workforce issues, such as the Seattle Construction Advisory Council, Pierce County Construction Partnership Council and the Port of Seattle.

Olson-Meyer said construction offers many rewards for women. On the trade level, it offers more advancement potential and salary than most jobs, she said. "I know a lot of women who went directly into management positions because women are good at multitasking."

Gerald Hermanson

Like many in the construction industry, Gerald Hermanson followed in his father's footsteps.

Hermanson grew up in Silverdale, where his father worked in sheet metal at the shipyards in nearby Bremerton. The younger Hermanson envisioned a marketing degree from the University of Washington, but that dream was crushed at age 17 after his father died.

Hermanson's new plan was to stay closer to home and attend Olympic College in Bremerton. He applied to be an apprentice sheet metal worker after college and got a job in 1955 at Lent's Sheet Metal in Bremerton.

In 1958, after he finished his apprenticeship, Hermanson was promoted to foreman and moved to Alaska to work on the Aleutian Radar Station. He later returned to the Puget Sound area to start a sheet metal division for MacDonald-Miller.

In 1972, he joined Allied Sheet Metal, where he managed the sheet metal contract for the Bank of California tower in Seattle, his first job on a high rise. Later, he again found himself in Alaska, this time managing heat system installations in all the pump stations along the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System.



Hermanson

When ownership changed at Allied in 1979, Hermanson decided to venture out on his own. He bought Sweeney Plumbing & Heating, giving birth to Hermanson Corporation.

Three years later, he landed a huge contract that put him on the map.

“People took a chance on me and I did the Columbia Center,” he said. “I was just starting out. I was way over my head.”

But the Columbia Center project turned out so well, that its developer, Martin Selig, hired Hermanson for many more projects.

Hermanson also installed HVAC systems in the Washington State Convention Center and the Museum of Flight, as well as houses owned by Bill Gates and Paul Allen.

One of the most challenging projects was installing huge ducts and equipment high in the air at a Boeing paint hangar in Everett, he said.

The 77-year-old Hermanson has eased out of the business over the past five or six years, turning control of his company over to his son, Rick, and other long-time employees. The company's name also changed, ever so slightly, to Hermanson Company.

Outside of the business, Hermanson served as a board member of South Seattle Community College, and was a leader within the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractor's National Association of Western Washington and the Sheet Metal Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee.

Hermanson said he helped start SMACNA's first peer group, where non-competing members from across the country help each other with business issues.

His advice for those getting into the construction industry? “Relationships, relationships, relationships,” he said. “If you take care of your customers and you take care of your people, and don't do anything stupid, you'll be fine.”

Since getting out of construction, he has focused on a love of his life: salmon fishing. He owns a cabin on an island 100 miles west of Ketchikan where he can be found fishing for kings. A few years back, he and a guest, Congressman Norm Dicks, both had big kings on their lines. It turned out that Dicks' fish, at 56 pounds, was 3 pounds heavier than Hermanson's. But, Hermanson said the biggest salmon he has caught topped 60 pounds.

When he's not fishing, Hermanson can be found on the golf course. “The only reason I golf is to waste time before the fishing season starts,” he quipped.

In keeping with his love for fishing, Hermanson cofounded the Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group, which raises salmon and betters their habitat. He also serves on the board of Long Live the Kings, another salmon enhancement group.

Hermanson, Olson-Meyer and Cochran join 32 others that make up the hall of fame. They will be inducted on June 1 at a gala event at Bell Harbor International Conference Center.

Tickets are \$175, with proceeds supporting the UW's Department of Construction Management. Reservations may be made by calling (206) 685-4438 or visiting <http://cm.be.washington.edu/Events/HOF.php>.

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