

MEET NANCY PETERSON

Concrete harmony

Sarah Fister Gale



As a child, Nancy Peterson loved two things: math and playing the violin. And she excelled at both. So when it came time for college, she faced a conundrum. She wanted to pursue a career in both fields and even declined an offer from the School of Mines in Colorado because they had no

music program.

Eventually, she landed at Colorado University in Boulder as an engineering major. “I realized I couldn’t major in music and do engineering on the side,” she says. She played in the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra while in school and is currently a member of the Jefferson Symphony Orchestra.

Peterson completed her degree at Metropolitan State University of Denver in 1988 and quickly landed a job at Rockwell International. The following year, she and her husband of three weeks relocated to the San Francisco Bay area of California where they both saw better job prospects.

Within four days of arriving, the city was hit by the magnitude 6.9 Loma Prieta earthquake during the World Series. “It was terrifying,” she says, but it also led to her next job. Peterson spent the next two years working for Brewster Consulting Engineers retrofitting wood frame homes that had fallen off their foundations during the earthquake. It was interesting work, but eventually the cost of living in San Francisco got to be too much to bear, so they moved back to Denver.

That’s when she met Jim Sirko, of Sirko Associates, who introduced her to precast concrete. Before that, Peterson had known virtually nothing about the material. She recalls one professor dedicating only half of one lecture to prestressed concrete. Once Sirko explained the material and how it worked to Peterson, though, she was hooked.

“You have to be very detail oriented, which is one of the things I love about it,” she says. “I love the precision and the tight tolerances. You’re striving for perfection all the time.”

Peterson spent the rest of her career working in precast concrete. After two years with Sirko Associates, she spent a decade with Leap Associates, then held positions with FDG Precast Engineering and Rocky Mountain Prestress before landing at Encon United.

Over the years, Peterson helped to design and expand multiple stadiums across the country, including the Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego, Calif., and both the Raymond James

Stadium in Tampa Bay, Fla., and the FTX Arena in Miami, Fla. She also designed several prisons, including a supermax penitentiary in Florence, Colo., and a landmark IKEA store for which she won a Women of Influence in Commercial Real Estate award.

Throughout her career, Peterson has relied on PCI to provide guidance and camaraderie as she navigated the industry.

She joined PCI and attended her first convention in 1996. “It was a little bit overwhelming,” she says. But then her boss, Craig Barrett at Leap, introduced her to Jim Voss and she felt immediately at home. “I remember thinking that I needed to get to know these guys because they were so much fun,” she says.

In 2000, she joined the Concrete Chefs, PCI members who host and cook for an annual fundraising dinner for the PCI Foundation, where she contributes her signature jambalaya. She later joined and eventually chaired the Soundwall Committee, where she was the principal author of the “Guide Specification for Reflective Precast Concrete Soundwalls.” Later she became a member of PCI’s board of directors, and she is now on the PCI Foundation Board of Trustees.

In her current role, she is focused on getting the next generation of engineers, architects, and project managers excited about the precast concrete industry and what the material can do. “This younger generation with their innovations can see things with new eyes,” she says. “It’s exciting to watch them work.”

It’s also necessary to keep the precast concrete industry growing and thriving. Peterson says that engineering and architecture students are still not being exposed to precast concrete in their college studies, and she wants the foundation to change that. “We are giving grants to schools to develop curriculum for precast programs, and we are reaping benefits from it,” she says.

A big part of this process is educating students about the safety, durability, and energy efficiency that precast concrete can bring to a project, especially as climate crises continue to expand. “Whether it’s hurricanes or forest fires, we can design things with precast that will save a lot of lives,” she says.

She says that any PCI member who ever had to educate an architect about precast concrete or search for an engineering applicant with real knowledge of the industry should support the foundation’s work. “We want to foster relationships with young architects, engineers, and construction managers to keep the industry growing,” she says. “It’s a great way to give back to the industry that has given us so much.”