

Greg Alvin Howell: Lean Construction Pioneer and Unshakeable Ally

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The passing of Greg Howell on 6/15/2020 is a monumental event on many levels - to family, friends, practitioners, and academics. We have lost an icon of Lean Construction; a trailblazer, an eminent scholar, and a wonderful, kind and beautiful person. I am eternally indebted and grateful to Greg Howell and Glenn Ballard; for adopting and embracing me in 2000; I enjoy where I am now because of them.

Greg's loss is a loss of the love, care, kindness, and support of an unshakeable ally. My heart is broken. Greg was so much to me, as he has been to everyone who has known him or crossed his path. He taught me so much. He was a mentor and a surrogate father. He often told me what I didn't want to hear; or really he said it like it was because he cared and took the surrogate father to heart.

GAH: The Person and Scholar

Where should one begin with an account of Greg's contributions? His intellect, intelligence, vision, wisdom, wit and humor are all worthy of special treatment. Some examples: (1) Some of the 'Gregisms' that are golden nuggets to heed and ponder: "Construction projects are not houses of cards, if one card falls then the whole thing collapses, but they are commitment-free zones and we need to start making reliable commitments," "How can you deliver or do things just in time if you don't know what time it is," "You get the highest return on things you give others for free," "Your job as a consultant is to work yourself out of a job, otherwise why are you there," "Indecision is the key to flexibility," "There is life after tenure," "Nothing in moderation." (2) At an IGLC mid-year meeting, I was getting rather stuck in my own ways of presenting a topic. Greg told me that 'in many situations, being right will only get you second place.' (3) I called Greg up for advice about a seminar that AGC of America asked for on Lean Construction. He told me a couple of things to watch out for and include. Then he said, and I could see his smile through the phone: "Tariq, don't screw it up." (4) During the second LCI Academic Forum (2001) in Tempe, AZ, we went to a famous restaurant called Rustler's Rooste. I needed to use the restrooms. I found my way to two respectively signed doors with 'steers' and 'heifers.' English is not my mother tongue - Arabic is. Smartphones and Google were not ubiquitous then either. So, I went back and asked Greg

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about which I should go into. He told me with no equivocation: ‘the heifers of course!’ The lesson I learned that day was that if Glenn was present, I should ask him for directions.

So many things to recount about Greg as I said. Glenn and Greg had different styles, and they were very trusting of those they chose to work with and include in the journey. Glenn gave strategic intent and checked months later on how the dish was turning out. Greg would call up or email and want to bounce off ideas. His curiosity and questioning of everything was contagious. He loved to cross-pollinate with and from other fields. When presenting something newly discovered, he taught me to begin with something everyone would know or share in through experience. I learned from him that demonstrating one’s experiences/expertise is appreciated, welcomed, and invited when those present, and absent, are asked for their viewpoints and perspectives.

I remember vividly a call in October 2007. He was eager to try out a new way of presenting what Lean Construction is to projects, which is different than the conventional paradigm. He said: “Anyone and their cousin can claim they want to remove waste and add more value. This is not unique enough to those who are not already convinced with the lean ideals. We need something better to invite over those on the fence.”

The challenge, and he said he was thinking about this for a long time, is to state what Lean Construction brings to projects that conventional (traditional or historical) construction management does not. He then asked me what I thought the distinctions were. I stated some things. He acknowledged what I said - as Greg always did. He then said, how about this: “A project needs an operating system, organizational structure, and commercial terms to come together in a way to deliver what the owner is seeking from the engagement with the project team.” He went on to explain the three domains with a Lean Construction lens. I was impressed. I interjected that the project also needs collaboration-enabling technology. Greg agreed. Then he told me laughing: “Tariq, the project also needs water, air, and a whole host of other things. I want this to be easy to remember and capture the basic needed elements. Outcomes such as on time, at cost, desired quality and sustainability, safe execution, and no litigation will result when the three basic elements are aligned and designed in harmony with the lean ideals.” He said he was going to call Will Lichtig back!

GAH: Dealing with Loss

In consoling me over the years in circumstances of departure of close family members and friends, Greg used to share one of his favorite poems - “The Weighing” by Jane Hirshfield:

The heart's reasons,
seen clearly,
even the hardest
will carry its whip-marks and sadness
and must be forgiven.



As the drought-starved
eland forgives the drought-starved lion
who finally takes her,
enters willingly then
the life she cannot refuse,
and is lion, is fed,
and does not remember the other.

So few grains of happiness
measured against all the dark
and still the scales balance.

The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

Greg would also tell me that a loss is not like a cold or flu that we get over. Rather a loss leaves us with a hole in our hearts, and we just get used to it being there after a while. I know it will take a long time to get used to the hole Greg is leaving but I hope the process comes with good memories and not just overwhelming sadness.

Hannah Arendt penned in the *Human Condition* (1958) the following: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them."

GAH: Celebrating Him!

The Lean Construction Journal (LCJ) collected and published contributions for this special In Memoriam to our dear beloved Greg Howell. A detailed accounting of Greg's life was provided by Dr. Glenn Ballard. This serves as a foundation for the rest of the contributions. We asked the contributors to describe how they came to know Greg, how he impacted their Lean Construction journey, and anything else they wished to share for posterity on his behalf.

Professor Iris Tommelein and Dr. Cynthia Tsao organized a special memorial event for Greg at the 28th annual, and 1st virtual, IGLC meeting held this year out of UC Berkeley. Many colleagues who could speak did (Tommelein, Tsao, Macomber, Koskela, Lichtig, Mossman, Zettel, Sacks, Alves, and Rybkowski) and were respectively bookended by Ms. Emily Howell and Ms. Dana Howell. It was a cathartic moment.

LCI has of course recognized Professor Greg Howell on the main website. The 22nd Annual LCI Congress is coming up and I am sure the organizers will recognize Greg. The recognitions and commemorations of Greg will not cease – and will live on from the simple



tradition he established such as the Duck Call during meetings and the profound ones such as encouraging extending inquiry into all areas and domains that allow us to see, think and act on the construction industry in different ways.

Anything we do will be infinitesimally small in comparison to what Greg has done for us, and for the Construction Industry. We will carry on as best as we can in the hopes Greg looks on and smiles in approval!! Thank you, and farewell until we meet again, Greg!!

