

Greg Alvin Howell: “A Special Person and Exceptional Leader”

Victor Ortiz¹

Greg attended the first-ever Post-It Note, collaborative, construction process-mapping session in 1984, where I assisted Michael Doyle in facilitation. Greg immediately saw the importance of well-facilitated collaboration and never missed a chance to learn. He and Glenn Ballard completed the Advanced Facilitator training at Interaction Associates, where I was a trainer and Glenn joined us in a consulting project at Ford to completely re-engineer their product development process, in the face of competition from Japan.

Cross-functional design teams and collaborative production management were keys to success in the Automotive Industry that became foundational to Lean Construction. It was clear that collaborative teams could transform an industry. We were learning as we went, and we never stopped.

It takes a certain kind of courage to stand up in public and tell the largest industry in the world that they have got it mostly all wrong, but Glenn and Greg have done just that. It takes a particular kind of person and an exceptional kind of leadership to pull that off.

Greg was one of the most likeable, funny, interesting, engaging, curious, kind, and lovable people I ever met. My life has been immeasurably enriched by more than 35 years of friendship. We co-facilitated partnering sessions in the 90’s and puzzled over how to move “Partnering” from words to effective actions. Those actions took form in the evolution of Lean Construction and LCI and in many, many consulting jobs.

Dana Howell, Greg’s wife, explains why so many of us loved Greg from practically the first moment we met him, on the fact that he treated everyone with respect and openness, even when he disagreed with you. He was modest, honest, frequently brilliant, and never feared to share what he did not know, in hopes of figuring things out together. And whatever he did figure out was communicated in deeply human, usually funny stories, as only Greg could tell them. His “absent-minded professor” persona, often with a shirttail askew and rumpled hair, and his exceptional story-telling skills endeared him to us and made learning fun.

Greg respected and practiced leadership that was all about bringing out the best in both individuals and teams, and never about self-promotion or use of positional authority to control others. It’s the sort of leadership we need today more than ever, and the kind of leadership that makes design and construction teams perform at ever-higher levels.

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Greg and I shared a love of good food and wine. There were so many dinners together, whether generously sponsored by an LCI Corporate Partner at LCI Congress or shared on a canoeing picnic along an Idaho stream with Greg and Dana. I cherish all these memories and miss Greg deeply.

*Excerpt from: Ballard, G (2020). Greg Alvin Howell: In Memoriam (1).
Lean Construction Journal 2020 pp 154-159
www.leanconstructionjournal.org*

Gregory Alvin Howell (Greg Howell) passed away peacefully on June 15, 2020 at home in Ketchum, Idaho. He was born February 3, 1943 in Springfield, Missouri to Alvin Hinshaw Howell and Joyce Howell, née Gregory. He lived in Independence, Missouri before moving to Scottsdale, Arizona when he was in high school. Greg studied construction engineering at Stanford, was a member of the ATO fraternity, and played on the university rugby team. After he graduated in 1965, Greg joined the Navy as a Lieutenant Commander in the Civil Engineering Corps and commanded Mobile Construction Battalion 11, better known as the Seabees. He served in Vietnam in Dong Ha and then led a group of 12 Navy men in a kind of Peace Corp role in northern Thailand for one year. After returning to the U.S. he served as Aide to Admiral Robert Wooding. Among his duties was recruiting on university campuses in full dress uniform amidst the rising protests against the war in Viet Nam.

In 1972, after leaving the Navy, Greg worked with Paolo Soleri at Arcosanti for a while, then returned to Stanford for a Master’s in Construction Engineering. Two of his instructors, Henry Parker and Clark Oglesby, had just authored a book on construction productivity improvement. Their teaching inspired Greg to explore more fully how to improve construction work methods, and in 1989, Greg joined his mentors as author of Construction Productivity Improvement. After graduating in 1973, he started working at Timelapse, Inc. in Mountain View, CA. Greg eventually took over the company and hired his future wife, Dana Langhorne, as office manager.

In 1986, Greg moved from California to Albuquerque, where he held the position of Visiting Professor, funded by the New Mexico AGC, in the construction program at the University of New Mexico. In 1997 he left the University and moved to Ketchum, Idaho. He founded the Lean Construction Institute with Glenn Ballard to work with construction industry companies to develop and deploy Lean thinking and practice. In 2001, he founded Lean Project Consulting with Hal Macomber.