

## A Workhorse for the Future Workforce

### ABC's Contractor of the Year Champions Craft Training

By Joanna Masterson

When reflecting on his 48 years with [Lake Mechanical Contractors](#), John Smith is quick to point out how thankful he is that his parents risked leaving Texas in the mid-1940s to start a plumbing business in Eustis, Fla. The rest of the open shop construction industry should be thankful, too, as that move started Smith on the path to becoming a licensed mechanical contractor and master plumber, taking the reins of the family business, and helping spearhead the effort to develop industry-wide construction craft training curriculum via [Associated Builders and Contractors](#) (ABC) and the [National Center for Construction Education and Research](#) (NCCER).



For these accomplishments, ABC proudly named Smith the association's 2009 Contractor of the Year. Smith accepted the award Feb. 4 at ABC's National Convention in San Diego, where 25 Lake Mechanical staff members gathered to share in his achievement.

"I always appreciated my father's common sense about a lot of things," Smith says. "Being fair to your employees and appreciating what they do was always important, and we still focus on that today. We really enjoy the ability to make a good living; in this industry, there's an opportunity to be profitable for you and your family."

Working in the field while attending Eustis High School inspired Smith to get a bachelor's degree in heating and air conditioning from North Carolina State University. After graduating in 1962, Smith returned to Florida to contribute to the family business with his new bride, Evelyn, by his side. Nearly five decades later, they remain steadfast partners as CEO/chairman and secretary/treasurer, with the firm performing \$22 million per year on commercial, institutional and industrial construction projects across Florida, North Carolina and Georgia.

#### A Lasting Effect

Smith has always enjoyed the nature of HVAC, plumbing and process piping work, but his professional passion extends beyond what he calls providing the "heart, lungs and veins of a building." His legacy is the generations of superintendents and craft professionals who are onsite day in and day out, bringing projects to fruition. In fact, Lake Mechanical's vision statement emphasizes one objective above all others: training and developing employees so they can deliver quality work and share in the company's growth.



"Our employees are our future, and we must do everything possible to ensure their success," Smith says. "That is what has kept me involved in ABC for all these years."

Indeed, Smith's introduction to ABC aligned with his desire to find a better way to train plumbers and pipefitters in the field. In 1973, he was invited to serve on the board of directors of the newly formed

ABC Central Florida Chapter. The following year, the chapter's apprenticeship program was up and running.

Since then, not a year has passed in which Smith did not hold a leadership position with ABC. He stayed active in the Central Florida Chapter, serving as president in 1977; became involved in ABC of Florida (the statewide organization), serving as president in 1979; and volunteered at the ABC National level, serving as Region 4 vice chairman in 1988 and national president in 1991.

Additionally, Smith was an integral part of ABC's National Education Committee. In the 1970s, when most large contractors conducted in-house training, the committee saw the value in developing standard curricula for construction trades. Years of hard work were devoted to the task, and in the early 1980s ABC unveiled the Wheels of Learning—four-year apprenticeship programs for 16 construction crafts approved by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL).

The Wheels of Learning curriculum became the backbone of the NCCER, which spun off from ABC and moved to Gainesville, Fla., in 1996. Always ready to serve, Smith stepped up as an NCCER trustee from 1998 to 2000.

"It came down to convincing 10 big companies that curriculum didn't need to be proprietary," Smith says. "It was expensive for them to keep it updated. With NCCER, we could come together and make it world class."



Today, the NCCER offers construction and maintenance curricula and a complete line of safety and management programs as part of the competency-based Contren Learning Series. Taught nationwide by contractors, associations, and secondary and post-secondary schools, the flexible, portable curriculum is developed by industry experts and complies with the DOL Office of Apprenticeship requirements for time-based training.

#### **Trained to Succeed**

Smith also played an integral role in creating ABC's Craft Olympics, later renamed the National Craft Championships. The idea was formulated on a boat ride in Birmingham, Ala., with 1980 ABC National President Ted Kennedy, founder of BE&K. Smith and fellow Education Committee members were in Birmingham for a meeting when the conversation turned to the possibility of launching a national event that would highlight the skills of construction apprentices similar to the local competitions held by many ABC chapters. That brainstorm came to life in 1987, when sheet metal, carpentry, electrical and plumbing craft trainees competed in written and practical skills tests during the first Craft Olympics at the ABC National Convention in Orlando, Fla.

This year, the day after Smith accepted his Contractor of the Year award, 97 trainees representing 10 crafts competed in the 24th annual National Craft Championships.

The idea behind the competition—showing off the talent involved in construction careers and fostering excellence in training—underscores Smith's zeal for workforce development.

"Training our workforce is critically important because we can help these individuals become craft professionals and provide them with the skills, opportunities and pride in their ability to make a good living for themselves and their families over a lifetime," he says.

With an entire generation of baby boomers ready to retire, recruiting workers to fill the industry's manpower shortage is just as crucial today as it was when Smith led ABC as national president in 1991. His outlook then remains pertinent today: "We are accustomed to bidding for work. We must now bid for workers as well."

The Achilles heel in Smith's message is that the economic downturn has lessened the need for workers. But, glaring vacancies are apt to resurface once the nonresidential construction market rebounds.

"The DOL keeps releasing reports about how many workers we're losing," Smith says. "The only way to replace them is to recruit and train them. If we don't have these people, we can't build what we build. We need to be concerned about who's going to be in our industry at the craft level."

Additionally, Smith emphasizes the importance of continuing to train workers throughout their careers so they are up to date on technology and industry standards.

"ABC founder John Trimmer wrote that the merit shop movement is a movement for the betterment of the individual, the industry and the nation. That's a pretty strong statement. It's not just about ABC," Smith says. "We're great believers in free enterprise and that companies and individuals can do just about anything they want based on their own merit."

Now that Smith has helped his company—and the entire industry—grow for nearly five decades, he says he and his wife are beginning to think about retirement. Lake Mechanical recently created a new management team, with Tom Sherman stepping in as president and Smith serving as the chairman and CEO. Evelyn, who was mayor of Eustis four times in 20 years, continues to keep a sharp eye on the company's finances. This August, the couple will celebrate 49 years of marriage.

**Joanna Masterson is senior writer of *Construction Executive*.**