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Russ Leavitt

**2013 Henry S. Parmelee
Award Recipient**

— also in this issue —

Exhibitor Showcase

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Honoring a Commitment to Industry Education

AFSA Honors Russ Leavitt With Henry S. Parmelee Award

D'ARCY MONTALVO | American Fire Sprinkler Association

The Henry S. Parmelee Award, the highest honor presented by the American Fire Sprinkler Association (AFSA), was created to recognize an outstanding individual who has dedicated himself or herself to the professional advancement of the fire sprinkler industry and to the goal of fire safety through automatic sprinklers. This year's honoree didn't begin his career in this industry, but once he discovered his path, he made an impact that has been felt worldwide. This year, AFSA is proud to honor Russ Leavitt, S.E.T., C.F.P.S., executive chairman of Telgian Corporation, Tempe, Ariz. with its highest honor, the Henry S. Parmelee Award.

Dedicated to Education During his work career, Leavitt has spent all but three years in the fire protection industry. He got his start in 1981 when looking for a transition from the insurance industry. Friend Mike Berry was in management at Sentry Automatic Sprinkler (formerly Dahn Brothers) and talked to Leavitt about their formal design trainee program.

"When Mike asked me if I had ever thought about fire sprinklers, I admitted I hadn't but decided to take the interview. During the interview, I was asked if I had any technical training. The only 'training' I'd had was a high school drafting class!

"I was told I was probably not qualified, but a few weeks later I got an acceptance letter. I thought it was a mistake, but it was right; they wanted me."

That class became the first step in a life-long career dedicated to the fire protection industry.

"I thought the class was pretty cool," remembers Leavitt. "After graduation I was transferred to the San Diego office. That was in 1982. The district manager there was Ron Snodgrass and he was a good mentor. After awhile, I made lead designer."

During this time, Wormald purchased the company. In 1984, Snodgrass decided to start a design-only company that would focus on fire sprinkler plans for contractors and asked Leavitt to join him.

"Working with Ron doing design gave me exposure to a lot of different contractors," says Leavitt. "At that time I became involved with the local Society of Fire Protection Engineers (SFPE) chapter and also worked with the San Diego Fire Department."



Leavitt promoting fire sprinkler systems at a 1988 San Diego Home Show.

This was the time when Leavitt first experienced teaching others on a widespread basis, making his first seminar presentation on hydraulics.

Leavitt's first experience with the AFSA was attending the convention held in Anaheim. Shortly thereafter, he joined American Automatic Fire Sprinkler, owned by Mike and Debbie Irwin. As general manager there, Leavitt became actively involved with the AFSA.

"I was attracted to AFSA because of the emphasis on training. As a merit shop company, we needed training and quickly became involved with the apprenticeship program.

When AFSA formed a Southern California Chapter, Leavitt served in a number of capacities. He was also asked to be a part of the California Joint Apprenticeship Committee, working for approval of AFSA's apprenticeship program at the state level.

"We were finally able to get that program approved by the state, placing us head-to-head with the union state program," he remembers.

At that same time, Leavitt joined with other contractors to form the San Diego Fire Protection Association to deal with local issues and fire departments and help develop policies. Leavitt served as both vice president and president of the association.



Leavitt's teaching travels have taken him around the world and led him to many new experiences, including adventurous outings in the Middle East.



“It was during that time that we started doing training for the local jurisdictions and that’s where I really became associated with Bob Caputo. Our training seminar developed into a monthly program. We’d spend a half-day with fire officials from San Diego and Riverside counties to teach a variety of topics. That training is still carried on to this day.”

In 1990, Leavitt started his own business with Bill Holden. The duo formed Fire Design Group to design sprinkler systems for contractors and architects. The following year they joined with Bill Tomes, Chuck Van Rickley, and Jim Tomes of Tomes, Van Rickley & Associates in forming Fire Design Group, Inc. The group eventually changed the name to TVA Fire Life Safety, Inc. With the exception of Chuck Van Rickley, who left the firm in early 1996, they are still partners today.

“Chuck and Bill were retired fire marshals/fire chiefs from San Diego who had formed a consulting firm. Bill and I brought the design and contracting aspect. We joined together and built that firm. In 2001, we opened Fire Materials Group, and in 2006 we combined TVA and Fire Materials Group into Telgian Corporation. All of those companies are from the same roots, and same group has been together since the very beginning.”

Leavitt continued to be involved with AFSA as a design professional member, and one day he received a phone call from the association... and the rest is education history!

“AFSA called Bob Caputo and me about an upcoming five-day seminar scheduled for Albany, N.Y. that they needed help with. We went up there with code books and taught. It seemed to go well. That started our involvement with AFSA and teaching seminars. We kinda winged it at first but it worked!

“I’ve always wanted to be involved; it’s just my nature. But I also had partners and supervisors along the way who have always supported my involvement with AFSA,” notes Leavitt.

Leavitt and Caputo would often split up seminar weeks and each teach a few days. “We shared a lot of hotel rooms. It was

a great learning experience for me. Bob knew more about fire sprinklers than anyone I had ever been associated with. He was fun to teach with and I was in awe of his ability to hold an audience.”

“It was a lot of fun and great exposure. We learned a ton. We held these all over the United States for all kinds of organizations. When we first started doing this, we used overhead projectors. As PowerPoint came into being, we switched to that.”

Leavitt and Bob Caputo still spend some of their time presenting seminars for AFSA, as well as other industry organizations.

“Over the past 23 years, Russ and I have been competitors, associates, business partners. Most of all, we’ve been friends,” comments Caputo. “We have been teaching partners for most of this time, and while I’d like to believe we have challenged each other and learned from each other, the truth is Russ is the quintessential teacher and a true industry leader. He is someone whom I respect and who I consider to be one of our industry’s valued leaders.”

When TVA executives formed Fire Materials Group, Leavitt moved to Tempe, Ariz. to headquarter the company there. Having expanded their scope beyond design work, the company joined AFSA as a contractor member.

Leavitt notes that the company’s membership in AFSA has paid for itself many times over, as it has gained exposure to new customers from contacts made through the Association.

“The first year we were a Class 3 or 4 contractor. When our AFSA renewal came the next year, I realized our volume had really increased. I noticed our dues were going to be five times what we had paid the previous year, as we now qualified as a C9 contractor. My hand was shaking when I signed that check!”

But, Leavitt adds, he and his company are still very proud their AFSA membership.

“I wrote AFSA’s original NICET study guide program and have done a number of other online education presentations,” he says, “and I’ve always been happy to do it.”

Leavitt has also been involved with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and its committees since 1990.

“My very first committee was as an alternate to Bill Tomes on the old NFPA 231C. In 1996, I was appointed as a principal to NFPA 25 and have served on that committee ever since.”

Leavitt represents AFSA on the NFPA 5000 Correlating Committee and the NFPA 13 Installation Technical Committee. He chairs the NFPA 13 Sprinkler System Discharge Technical Committee, and serves on the NFPA Cultural Resources 909 and 914 committees and NFPA 3 and 4 committees. He has also served on several other committees.

“It was during my service on NFPA committees where I had a chance to really get to see some of the other AFSA staff and volunteers in action. When I became an instructor with NFPA in 2007, it was because an NFPA staff person saw me in action presenting an AFSA convention seminar.”

Becoming an instructor for NFPA led to international travel and teaching for Leavitt.

“My first trip was to Saudi Arabia. The international stuff has been fun. I’ve been to Mexico, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, Egypt, Oman, Kuwait, Dubai – all over the Middle East, as well as Istanbul, Turkey. To be in Istanbul and stand in buildings that are 1,500 years old is pretty cool.

“I’ve been extremely fortunate to do that. In the process I’ve done a lot of seminar development for NFPA. I’ve helped them as a subject matter expert on a number of seminars, both live instruction and online.”

Telgian has grown over the years to working in all 50 states. The company also has operations in Canada and Mexico.

“We have projects going on in the Middle East and Philippines. We’ve done work in South America. So it’s been a ‘real ride’ so to speak,” comments Leavitt. “The interesting thing about being and doing what we do is that I literally have the opportunity to see our industry everywhere, in all different parts of the United States and the world.

“It’s been fun to see fire sprinklers slowly get a hold in Europe, which has traditionally not looked at sprinklers as a fire protection solution. It’s been fun to see and be a part of the Middle East and their endorsement of NFPA standards and fire sprinklers in general, and again in Mexico and South America.

“We have a major, major customer that has never sprinklered facilities in Mexico and is now retrofitting properties. It’s fun to see and be a part of that education. It’s pretty exciting,” he states.

“There’s still a lot of work to do. As we go to some of these countries they are where we were 50 and 60 years ago, and they are just thirsty for knowledge because it’s all new. So it’s really fun to be a part of that and see it growing,” he summarizes.

Making a Difference Leavitt has been executive chairman of Telgian since 2009. Under his direction, Telgian provides a wide range of fire protection and life safety services including fire systems engineering and design, code consulting, loss control engineering, installation, and the inspection and testing of systems.

“I love to teach. Training is my passion,” comments Leavitt. “When I graduated from college I very seriously considered teaching as a career and had been accepted into master’s program and to work as a teaching assistant. But I had two kids and needed to earn a living. This has been great because I’ve gotten to teach and do the rest of my work. I’ve been very blessed and very lucky in that regard.”

Leavitt has reached thousands of people through his training and education seminars. He is a regular presenter at national events such as the Retail Construction Expo, AFSA, NFPA, and others. He has authored the AFSA study guide for NICET certification in inspection and testing; written numerous reports and articles for trade publications including *Fire Protection Contractor*, and *Sprinkler Age*; and was a major contributor to the 2011 and 2014 NFPA 25 Handbooks.

He is a graduate of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and holds a Level IV certification from NICET in Fire Sprinkler Layout and a Certified Fire Protection Specialist (C.F.P.S.). He is a licensed contractor and has over 32 years of experience in the design, installation, and testing of fire protection systems.

Leavitt has seen a lot of change from the time he started in this industry.

“When I started, all plans were drawn by hand, the pipe size for many systems was determined by using pipe schedules, and hydraulic calculations were manually performed. There were no quick response, extended coverage, CMSA, ESFR, or residential sprinklers; no fax machines, beepers, cell phones, emailing, texting, tweeting, or any other kinds of ‘ing’; no CPVC pipe; no schedule 5 or 7 steel pipe; no calculating of seismic bracing; and no NFPA 13D, 13R, or 25. But, we did have NFPA 231, 231C, 231D, and 231E. There weren’t any webinars, online training, PowerPoints, or ‘Go To’ meetings; no BIM or green design – ‘Fast Track’ jobs were the exception. Job site coordination was real; the list goes on,” reminisces Leavitt.

“Our profession has become absolutely dependent on technology,” he notes. “There are many more options for design approaches, and there are more choices than ever to make on equipment, piping materials, sprinklers, and system types. But this has resulted in the cost of adding sprinklers to a project having little increase over the years when compared to the other costs associated with constructing new buildings,” he says.

“The result? When I first started in the industry, most commercial buildings were not sprinklered and no residential occupancies were equipped with sprinklers. Now virtually all commercial buildings of any significant size are equipped with sprinklers, and nearly all multi-unit residential buildings are sprinklered, along with a significant number single-family homes. We have come a long, long way.”

Family Matters Leavitt has been married to his wife Jean for 38 years. They have three daughters and sons-in-law: Heidi and Terence Johnson, Camie and Ryan Smith, and Amy and Jason Williams. They also have 11 grandchildren with one more on the way. Ryan, Jason, and Amy are all involved with the industry.

“What keeps Jean there is I’m gone so much,” teases Leavitt. “But seriously, she is an awesome woman. It was just dumb luck when you’re that young (21) and hit the jackpot like I did.

“I was late to my wedding because I was working and lost track of the time. I was so late that my roommates thought maybe I had bailed and gotten cold feet. I was so late that I didn’t have time to shower and shave. I just threw on my tux, forgot my tie and showed up.”

Ever since, Jean tells people, “That should have told me something,” says Leavitt.

Leavitt enjoys playing the piano and golf. He loves the outdoors and finds time to fish and hunt a little. He’s active in his church, and, of course, he loves to travel.

Well-Deserved Honor Leavitt was born and raised in Las Vegas so it seems fitting he come full circle and return to receive AFSA’s highest honor in his hometown. AFSA Chairman of the Board Dwight Bateman, Southeast Fire Protection, Inc., will present the 2013 Henry S. Parmelee Award to Leavitt on September 19 during the opening general session of AFSA’s 32nd Annual Convention & Exhibition.

“I was literally stunned when got the call. I kept saying to Steve [Muncy], are you serious? Are you kidding me? It just came out of left field,” remembers Leavitt. “I was actually at an NFPA committee meeting in Victoria, British Columbia and was telling Jean ‘I’m stunned.’ She said ‘This means you’re getting old.’ That puts it all in perspective.

“You know what? This industry is my hobby as well as my business. Right now, I see myself being involved for a long time even if I were to retire from active participation in the company, I don’t think I’d ever stop being active in the industry.”

Notes AFSA President Steve Muncy: “Despite his demanding schedule as executive chairman of the Telgian Corporation, Russ has always found time to give back to the fire protection industry. He has given many hours of service on NFPA standards committees, and worked tirelessly to develop training programs to increase competency in the fire sprinkler industry.

He has always been available when AFSA called. Russ Leavitt is very deserving of this award.”

AFSA At-Large Director Jack A. Medovich, Fire & Life Safety America (FLSA), has worked with Leavitt for many years.

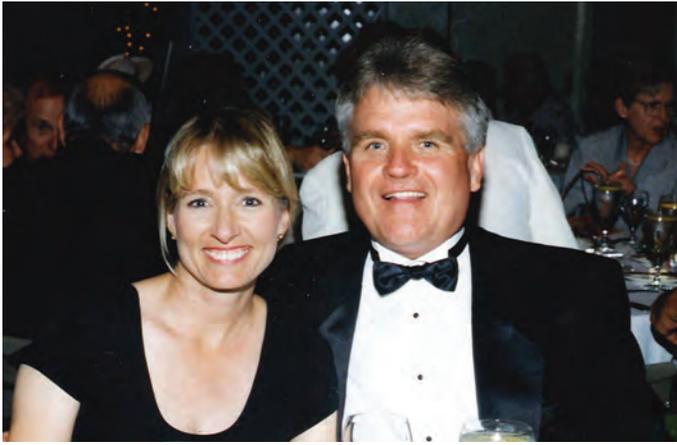
“FLSA has worked with Telgian and Russ Leavitt over the past 16 years. Russ has always been someone who truly cares about good fire protection and more importantly, life safety. He takes pride in his work and the work of his firm. He has worked tirelessly to increase the knowledge of our industry through the webinars and seminars he has taught over the course of his career. Russ is so deserving of this award! I congratulate him and thank him for advancing our industry over the years. We wouldn’t be where we are today without Russ!”

Bob Caputo notes Leavitt’s commitment to the industry as well.

“Russ gives a great deal of his time and energy to our industry and to furthering the careers of others unselfishly and gener-

Henry S. Parmelee Award Recipients

1983	John M. Rhodes, FM Global Research Corp.
1984	William J. Meyer, Central Sprinkler Corporation
1985	C. B. Hall, American Automatic Sprinkler Co.
1986	Harold L. Black, Central Fire Protection, Inc.
1987	Edward J. Reilly, Ed Reilly Associates
1988	Richard T. Groos, The Viking Corporation
1989	Ron Coleman, Chief, Fullerton Fire Dept., CA
1990	Frank J. Fee III, Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Corp.
1991	Dr. John M. Bryan, University of Maryland School of Fire Protection Engineering
1992	W. D. (Dave) Hilton, Chief, Cobb County Fire Department, GA
1993	J. Frank Riseden, AFSA President 1983-1991
1994	Haden B. Brumbeloe, Publisher, FPC Magazine
1995	Edward H. Smith, H.F.P. Corporation
1996	Tom Waller, Viking Fire Protection of the SouthEast
1997	Chester W. Schirmer, Schirmer Engineering Corp.
1998	Tom Siegfried, Retired Chief, Altamonte Springs, FL
1999	Donald D. Becker, Midland Automatic Sprinkler Co.
2000	Robert L. McCullough, AllSouth Sprinkler Company (awarded posthumously)
2001	Buck Buchanan, Central Sprinkler Corporation
2002	Frank M. Winiecki, General Sprinkler Corporation
2003	Jack Viola, H.F.P. Corporation
2004	Lowell Gillett, Fire Engineering Co., Inc. (retired)
2005	Joe Hankins, FM Global (retired)
2006	Art Cote, National Fire Protection Association
2007	Tom Groos, The Viking Corporation
2008	William E. Corbin, Mutual Sprinklers, Inc.
2009	Lloyd Ivy, AFSA Director of Membership (1986-2008)
2010	Marty Giles, VSC Fire & Security
2011	Willie Templin, American Automatic Sprinkler, Inc.
2012	Bob Rees, Sunland Fire Protection
2013	Russ Leavitt, Telgian Corporation



Jean and Russ are active in their church and community, here attending an Interfaith Community Services Gala in 1999.

ously. I cannot imagine a better or more appropriate candidate for this award, as there is no better emissary or champion of our industry. I am always challenged by his selfless example of leadership and his strategic thinking. The only surprise is that it's taken so long for us to recognize him with this industry's greatest honor. Aside from the fact that Russ was still in high school when Parmelee invented the modern sprinkler," Caputo teases, "I am proud to call him friend and proud to join the industry in recognizing Russ for his contributions to fire protection and the fire sprinkler industry."

Leavitt's passion for this industry is obvious to those around him and his enthusiasm is infectious. He notes that he is one of those who got in industry by chance.

"There's lots of ways to make a living and good ways to make a living," he says. "We're so lucky to be able to make a living and provide for our families by doing it with something that really matters. When you're protecting people's assets and their lives and such, it's really cool. We have the best of both worlds. We can provide for our families with



Leavitt doesn't miss an opportunity to do something fun with his grandchildren, including playing piano with grandson Bryson.

something that means something in the end. We get to actually do something that matters.

"I believe this great industry is only now beginning to realize its potential. I'm not thinking about retiring any time soon... Heavens no!" he states emphatically.

"I love what I do and work is not work for me. This industry is fun. I found my home in the fire protection industry. I am proud to be associated with an industry that does make a difference in people's lives." ■



Russ and Jean (at right) enjoy spending time with their family. They have three daughters and sons-in-law and 11 grandchildren with one more on the way.

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