



The Poellinger family: Leanne, Mikel, Ethan and baby Evan.

Community Builder

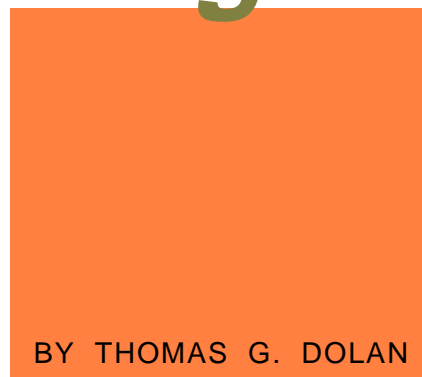
Mikel Poellinger



You've all heard that contemporary America is a fragmented society where



community mores have broken down and every individual is out for himself. However, if you've heard of Mikel Poellinger, the new president of The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International, you know this generalization is not true.




BY THOMAS G. DOLAN

Poellinger, though only 39 years old, has vast experience as a community builder. Family, community, profession and industry are so interwoven into his life that it's difficult to try to separate the different strands. But let's start with family and industry.

Poellinger calls the wall and ceiling community "a friendly industry."

He clearly regards AWCI as an extension of his natural family, and it is easy to see why. In 1957, his dad, John Poellinger,


awci welcomes its new president



started a residential plastering and stucco company, and joined AWCI. The fourth of five children, Mike grew up in the business. “Our summer or fall vacations took us to AWCI conventions,” he recalls. “Remembering going to Disneyland or other destinations as a part of these trips brings fond memories.”

Obviously, Poellinger was interested in construction at an early age. During the early 1980s he worked as an estimator during the summer while going to college. He started full time working for his father as an estimator in 1985. In 1989 he became general manager. In 1995, when his father was semi-retired, he became president. He purchased the business from his father in 1999.

Meanwhile he was, “working up through the ranks of AWCI,” he says. While in college, he began attending AWCI’s committee meetings for young




executives. Through the years he became involved in many specialty committees, and then became active on the regional level. “AWCI is a terrific organization,” he says. “A number of people I know in AWCI, I’ve known for 30 years, back since I was a child.”



community activity

To return to pick up the strand of the communities in which he’s lived and worked, Poellinger was born in raised in La Crescent, Minn., where he still lives. While in high school, he became active in the volunteer fire department. While going to college, he helped pay his way by working for an ambulance service. After college he became active in the community, and in 1987 he ran for city council. During his third term he ran for mayor. He’s now in his third term as mayor. Since the mayor is elected for two-year terms, he’s now been mayor for five and a half years.



Now, in what might first appear as an oddity—though Poellinger lives in the town in which he is mayor—his business and much of his political activity takes place across the river in La Crosse, Wis. There he’s active in an organization to revitalize the La Crosse downtown river community, and is also active in the La Crosse area development corporation. He’s as active in the La Crosse Chamber of Commerce as he is in the one in La Crescent.

But these activities are not as fragmented as they might first appear. La Crescent is a small city of 5,000, in a community of about 7,500. La Crosse, however, is the leading city in the area, with a population somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000. Many people who live in La Crescent, like Poelliiger, actually work in La Crosse, which, though across the river, is only about a seven-minute drive away.

As a local politician, Poellinger's point of view “has been to look beyond our immediate community to the regional area.” To this purpose he works with leaders from other communities in four counties in Minnesota and Wisconsin, called the United Coulee Region. As opposed to having a number of often small and isolated communities fending for themselves, Poellinger’s intent has been to extend the idea of community

so that a number of different towns can create mutual synergies that will benefit them all.

An example: About 10 years ago it would not have been possible for there to be cooperation between La Crosse and La Crescent in public services such as crime investigation. They represented two different cities, two different states and two different bureaucracies. Now, however, as the result of a federally funded interstate program that also is funded by both states, there are mutual agreements between the two cities for fire and police protection. La Crosse has about 130 firefighters and 135 police officers, while La Crescent has 25 fire fighters and seven police officers. But the two cities work together. In a recent abduction/homicide, Poellinger says, "Nobody was worried about who had arrest powers." The crime was quickly solved.

Poellinger and his wife, Leanne, have two sons, Ethan, 9, and Evan, 2. Their community service extends in other ways. They are involved in organizations

such as the United Way, the Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization, and the school district foundation. Poellinger is past president of the local Rotary Club.

business matters

To pick up the strand of his business, Poellinger, Inc. has expanded its original residential plastering and stucco work into mainly commercial lath, plaster, drywall, interior partitions, EIFS, fireproofing and acoustic ceilings, as well ceramics, hard flooring and carpeting. The main activities—drywall and steel framing—bring in more than \$4 million annually. Flooring and contract supply wholesaling are separate divisions.

The business routinely works a 50 mile radius, which includes the western part of Wisconsin, the southern part of Minnesota and eastern part of Iowa. The company is between Milwaukee and Minneapolis, but it does not typically

work in those areas; however, it does face competition from large companies coming out of those cities.

"Commercial work is very competitive, but, starting with my father, we've generated a strong reputation for quality and service, and we stand by it today," he says. "We do negotiated work whenever possible, and have a lot of repeat customers, especially from hospitals, schools and other institutions."

Poellinger runs a union shop, and has a core of about 60 employees, which goes up to about 100 during the busy season.

plan for awci

Poellinger plans to bring all the strands of his life together in his new role as AWCI's president. He reports that he never leaves a convention without learning something new or meeting a new friend that he is able to utilize within a few weeks. For instance, sometimes he is working with a new architect from outside the area, so he can network with an AWCI colleague to find out the architect's needs, which might not be expressed clearly in his plans.

Networking has been an essential ingredient in Poellinger's philosophy. He intends to meet the challenge of the retiring older generation, which is contributing to the problem of finding qualified workers, by bringing second-generation contractors as well as estimators, general managers and others of the newer, larger contractor organizations, which may not be family based, into the AWCI community.

"We've offered safety programs, video education and things like that, but now



Poellinger has been a driving force behind the success of AWCI's 50-50 raffle over the years.



Politician + Microphone =
AWCI's New President

our big challenge is to get more and more people involved in AWCI," Poellinger says. "We like to say we have the best contractors and suppliers in the industry, so we're going to work hard to get the younger generation involved. My experience is that you always get more out of the experience than what you put in." Poellinger is planning on a one-on-one networking strategy to accomplish this goal.

"AWCI is also becoming more involved on the international level," he says. "We've always had a good relationship with Canada, but now more and more Europeans are becoming involved. As the industry continues to grow, and as the technology changes, it's inevitable that we become more global."

He reports that, while traveling with other members of AWCI's Executive Committee to European construction industry trade shows, he's noted that Europeans are interested in learning more about U.S. steel framing and other modern construction techniques, while

U.S. members are interested in learning more about old world plastering and other crafts.

Poellinger reports that the Foundation of the Wall and Ceiling Industry, a separate and independent association, will continue to be revitalized through sponsoring educational and work exchanges

between different countries, as well as providing scholarships, and building its library for the purpose of preserving historical knowledge and providing state-of-the-art resources.

He adds that AWCI will continue its educational efforts, through video and other training, and build on regional



At an AWCI meeting in 1995, Poellinger still found time to cavort with his son, Ethan.

efforts to attract new workers to the industry.

how does he do it?

How does Poellinger manage to pack so much into a single day? For one thing, he doesn't need much sleep. He goes to bed at about 11 p.m. and is up at 4:30 a.m. By 5:30 a.m. he's at work. During his lunch time or in the early afternoon, he's doing most of his community work. He's back at the office from 4 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. After 6:30 p.m., he's either home or at a city council or some other community meeting.

Poellinger developed an interest in working in the coroner's office for death scene investigations, which he now does on a limited basis. But he still makes time for more traditional family activities.

He and his family take part in boating and other activities on the Mississippi river, he attends his son's soccer games,

skis in the winter and finds time to travel a bit.

Poellinger sums up his philosophy when he says, "If you're not satisfied with something, it will never be the way you want it unless you get involved. I think business and community involvement goes hand in hand. I enjoy being

involved with people and organizations. I enjoy the challenges of working together with others to solve problems. I think that heritage and history are important in all aspects, not only in the community, but also in the industry."

In short, AWCI and its new president, Mike Poellinger, are a perfect match. 📺