

FEBRUARY 2018

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ICON EXPO — MACHINERY & EQUIPMENT
THE PRECAST SHOW
ISSUE

A Passion for People and Precast

2017-18 NATIONAL PRECAST CONCRETE ASSOCIATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS
CHAIRMAN ASHLEY SMITH IS FOCUSED ON EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT AS THE KEY
TO UNLEASHING THE UNLIMITED POTENTIAL OF THE PRECAST INDUSTRY

Anybody who knows Smith-Midland Corp. President Ashley Smith could easily guess where the incoming National Precast Concrete Association chairman would focus his acceptance remarks: on people. Upon taking the helm at the group's 52nd Annual Convention last October, he spoke about developing a workforce where innovation, continuous improvement and attention to detail are the building blocks for quality precast concrete production.

LIFELONG PURSUIT

Smith brings a certified track record to his role as NPCA chairman when it comes to experience in the industry. He started working full-time 40 years ago for Smith-Midland, the family business headquartered in Midland, Va. Before that, he worked part-time during the summers and weekends as a youth painting, cleaning the plant and doing anything else his father, company CEO and Chairman Rodney Smith, had on his list of chores.

Ashley Smith worked his way up, toiling through various production jobs. He advanced to hauling sand & gravel and delivering products, and eventually joined the management team. This culminated with his promotion to president and chief operating officer in 2009. In that capacity, he works alongside brothers Jeremy, Matthew and Roderick Smith as they lead the company into the future. He is the third in his family to take the reins of the business started by his grandfather, David Smith, in 1960. He's also following his father in association leadership: Rodney Smith served as NPCA president in 1980.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

As a lifelong precaster, Ashley Smith has spent his career experimenting and learning, with the goal of continually improving his family's business. Throughout this pursuit, he estimates he has visited more than 400 precast plants, not just in the U.S., but in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Japan.

It was in Japan that he had an experience that changed the way he looks at his own business and the precast industry. There, Smith became enamored with lean manufacturing as embodied by the Toyota Production



System, which emphasizes building people before building cars and craftsmanship with exquisite attention to detail. "If you ever visit Japan, you'll see it," he says. "Every little detail is important. At Toyota, continuous improvement and attention to detail are driven by the employees on the plant floor, and it shows in the end product. I want our plant to be like that, and I want the precast concrete industry to be like that too, because it is vital to our future success."

Implementing the principles of lean manufacturing is anything but easy, and Smith-Midland has worked on it for years, through ups and downs, forging a path to more efficient manufacturing. Smith notes that lean manufacturing adoption is not a quick fix or an easy win for the team, but "if you're seeking meaningful change and are in it for the long haul, it may be the right fit."

"Lean, like most things in business, is all about people and everyone needs to be invested," he notes. "We now have people on the floor who take ownership of our processes and results, and who are empowered to make adjustments. That's huge because it frees managers up to work on other things."

PIGGYBACKING ON NPCA

Precasting is a tough, competitive business that requires ever-increasing levels of quality control and craftsmanship. The

pace of the daily grind can make it difficult to devote time and resources to developing employees, but it is crucial to success, Smith believes.

"The challenge for the precaster is, how do I find the time? I'm making precast. I've got customers calling. I'm taking orders. We have problems we have to deal with. How do I find time to get these folks trained?" he says. "That's where I kind of piggyback on what NPCA has. There's Leadership NPCA, Production and Quality School and the Master Precaster program, and all the education available online. We use the NPCA webinar series for lunch and learns. There's a whole history of webinars on the website so you can go back and view old ones. It's a huge resource. If you're a small precaster, or even a mid-size or larger company, it would be hard to offer all that by yourself."

In addition, Smith regularly takes a group of his top performers to The Precast Show for in-person training, plant tours and time on the trade show floor. "There's nothing better than The Precast Show to get them excited and motivated," he says. "They're learning that the company is investing in them. It pays off. People are going to be more loyal if they know you are invested in their future and want to make them successful."

Smith has heard the argument that if you spend time and money training your employees, they'll be more marketable and seek better jobs outside the company. He doesn't buy it. "Would you rather train somebody and take the chance that they'll leave, or never train them and have them stay? It's a risk we're willing to take."

Personal connections made through NPCA are also one of the keys to continued success, he believes. "Networking is one of the main things. Whether you're a president or an owner of a company, if you're in safety or HR, or if you're on the shop floor, there's always somebody you can meet and learn from—whether it's at classes or at the trade show talking with another precaster between events," he explains.

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SMITH-MIDLAND CORP. AT-A-GLANCE

Founded as a small business in 1960 by David Smith to sell precast concrete cattlesguards to his rural neighbors, the Smith Cattleguard Co. evolved over the next two generations into the Smith-Midland Corp., a multifaceted precast concrete company that employs more than 200 people at three plants along the East Coast.

Based in Midland, Va., about an hour north of Washington D.C., Smith-Midland manufactures modular buildings, architectural panels, sound and retaining walls, plus a wide range of utility products and structures. But that's only part of the story: By 1978 the precast cattlesguards were so popular that the company started licensing them to peer operators around the country. As the company grew, it developed a suite of six innovative products it now licenses to 70 producers across the globe through the Easi-Set Worldwide subsidiary: SlenderWall architectural panels; J-J Hooks positive connectors for freestanding barriers; Easi-Set Modular Buildings; SoftSound absorptive sound walls; Sierra Wall sound walls; and Beach Prisms for erosion control.

Publicly traded under the stock symbol SMID, its headquarters and primary production facility in Midland serves a region of nine states and the District of Columbia. Smith-Midland opened its second plant in 1979, Smith-Carolina, Reidsville, N.C., and expanded in 2016 with the acquisition of a Hopkins, S.C., facility now named Smith-Columbia. The three precast plants give the company a reach that spans the East Coast, from New York City to southern Georgia. The company specializes in products for a variety of markets including military, general construction, public works, agricultural, transportation, parks and recreation and security. Total revenue topped \$40 million in 2016, up from \$29.2 million the previous year, according to the Smith-Midland 2016 Annual Report.

Smith-Midland projects have won many awards over the years. A recent signature project is the 38-story Westin Hotel in Virginia Beach, Va. The state's tallest building, the hotel is clad with 84,248 square feet of SlenderWall architectural precast and steel-stud building panels. A significant milestone in recent years includes surpassing 12 million linear feet of production of J-J Hooks barriers—enough to reach across the United States, from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles.

In addition to its three precast plants and licensing division, the Smith-Midland suite of companies includes Concrete Safety Systems, which rents highway barriers for construction projects and special events. It also includes a full-service advertising and public relations firm, Midland Advertising + Design, founded in 1980 to handle production and media buys.



Midland, Va., headquarters



PHOTOS: Smith-Midland

Westin Hotel, Virginia Beach



J-J Hooks barriers, SoftSound walls: Interstate 66, Virginia

LESS YELLING, MORE PRODUCTIVITY

In addition to studying world-class companies to learn about lean manufacturing, Ashley Smith looks to them for examples of operational excellence and retaining their people. "We've said for years that our turnover is too high but it's only in the last couple of years where we've started to measure it and do something about it," he says. "We found that 80 percent of the people leaving were going within the first 116 days. What it caused us to do is take a different look at how we hire and onboard. We've improved about 10 percentage points in the last year by being more deliberate about onboarding and making sure they're successful and trained properly."

Increased retention has a variety of benefits, he adds: "You don't have to retrain people all the time. If we reduce turnover we're going to be a safer company. Quality is going to improve. Productivity is going to improve. It all ties together and reinforces. A people-oriented

culture starts with safety."

Smith-Midland has been focusing more intently on safety in the past five years, starting every management meeting and huddle with a review of the previous day. "We're really being intentional about making it a safe place to work," Smith affirms. "Our goal is zero recordable injuries. We're not there yet but we're working on it. When you're trying to make it more about the people who work here, the first thing is safety—both physically and emotionally. We want to make sure they don't get hurt, but also don't want them in an environment where they are constantly getting yelled at. In the old days, we had a lot of directives, a lot of yelling. And the result is you have a lot of people standing around waiting to be told what to do. That's just not going to work."

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Smith-Midland subsidiary East-Set Worldwide licenses production of namesake, all-precast restroom and storage buildings, shown below at Missouri's Echo Bluff State Park; and, the J-J-Hooks pin down safety barrier, protecting crews and motorists along a Virginia Route 29 overpass construction zone in Culpeper.



NATIONAL PRECAST CONCRETE ASSOCIATION AT-A-GLANCE

Founded in 1965, NPCA has grown to become an international trade association representing more than 900 companies and suppliers that manufacture hundreds of precast, prestressed and reinforced concrete pipe products for underground and above-ground applications. Member companies manufacture products that create and rebuild infrastructure, protect the environment and offer modularity, customizations and infinite creative design possibilities across all sectors of the construction industry. The association provides members with the latest technical and industry information through a host of publications, educational

seminars, product committees and meetings. It promotes high quality standards and safety through its education component and ANSI-accredited Plant Certification Program.

NPCA President Ty Gable, FASAE, CAE, has led the staff since 1994. During that time, NPCA has built a team of technical experts and grown the Plant Certification Program to more than 350 plants. In 2009, NPCA launched The Precast Show, the largest trade gathering specifically targeting the precast concrete products industry. In 2015, the Precast/Prestressed Concrete Institute joined The Precast Show as a partnering association.

NPCA is located near Indianapolis at 1320 City Center Drive, Suite 200, Carmel, IN 46032. Phone numbers are (317) 571-9500 or (800) 366-7731; email is npca@precast.org; website is precast.org.

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Smith-Midland flagship

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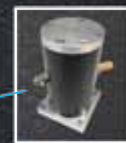
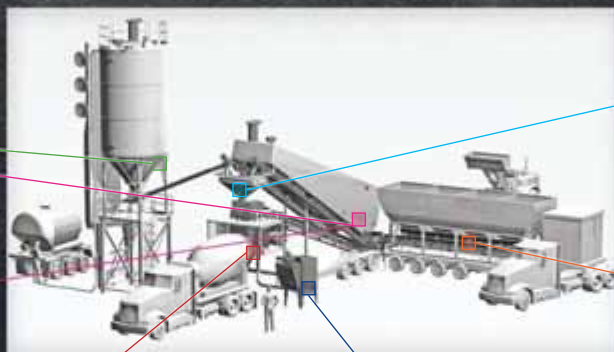


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DEFINITELY NOT TOUCHY FEELY

Instead, Smith wants to find the right people, provide them with training and resources and empower them to make decisions. "Respect for everybody is huge here," he says, "[but] I don't want us to come across as touchy feely because we're not. We hold folks accountable. It's not a soft, squishy, easy kind of place to work. We have some pretty aggressive targets and expectations. But I think that's the kind of place where people want to work."

One team member who is succeeding in that environment is Vaughn Gardner, a three-year employee who made a personal pledge to target one small improvement every day. It doesn't go unnoticed by the boss.

"Vaughn is probably close to 180 days in a row of making an improvement," notes Smith. "As an owner or manager or leader of a company, the people I want to invest in are like Vaughn, who have that hunger. They want to get better. If somebody says, 'Ashley, how do you move up at Smith-Midland?' I'll say, 'Go talk to Vaughn. Look at him and follow his example. If you want to learn how to get more opportunities or promotions, that's how you do it.'"

Precast concrete plants are not generally at the top of the list of "Best Places to Work" surveys. But that doesn't deter Smith, who observes, "Our goal is to be the best company in town—a company where everybody wants to come to work and nobody wants to leave. We're not where we want to be by any means but that's the goal and that's what we're working toward."



When stopping by the Midland plant QC lab, Ashley Smith (left) is near certain to learn of an improvement Vaughn Gardner institutes that day.

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