

JR Peterson PodCAST Transcript (16:17)

KARA

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today, we have a chance to talk to JR Peterson, Jr is an alum from the Department of Technology and currently serves as Senior estimator, water wastewater specialist for River City Construction. Welcome and thank you for being here.

JR

I appreciate it.

KARA

It's going to be fun. Let's start at the beginning. Jr, why did you choose ISU?

JR

Initially, I had gone down to Carbondale at SIC as a computer and electrical engineer, and a lot of my roommates were switching majors into the construction program down there. So I basically it was the year I met my wife, and so she was closer to Peoria, which is where I'm from. So it was just proximity.

KARA

So then tell us, once you were here, how did you choose your major? How'd you make that transition, along with your move from Carbondale, how'd you transition to the major that ended up being the right fit for you?

JR

Well, to be honest, I love construction. Since I was two years old, I always had, like, construction equipment just around the house. My grandfathers were in the labor force and unions. So when I realized that the major existed, which I don't think going into it, I

knew nothing about construction management. So my my thing was to go switch majors into civil engineering. And ISU didn't have a civil engineering program at that time, and I was kind of more leaning towards the state school just to save money on, you know, on getting an education, that my family wanted me to go to college and do those things. So once I knew the program was there. It wasn't a hard switch.

KARA

And what do you miss the most about your time on campus?

JR

I'm kind of more of an educator, so that's my primary focus in what I'm doing. So back in 2008 I was an adjunct professor in the program, and while I was doing my master's at Bradley. So I would say I miss kind of the teachers and interaction with classmates, and I didn't really spend a whole lot of time on campus whenever I was there, because I was commuting, but I like the campus. I'd spent a lot of time there. My sister went to ISU before I was down there, and I had friends from ISU, so I visited a lot, so I was familiar with it.

KARA

So then tell us, you get your construction management degree. What was that initial job search like for you? And where did you end up for your entry level job?

JR

Well, at the time, I was dating my wife And knew nothing about, you know, any of the companies in the area, because I hadn't really studied the construction market because, you know, I was moving out of Electrical Computer Engineering from SIU, and in dating my wife, her dad, was the vice president of river city at the time, and so I told him, You know, I applied to a different company for an internship, and he told me to put my resume In. I said, Okay, so that's how my situation evolved was by circumstance. And basically I had no idea what my father in law did, and I knew nothing of river city at the time, but it just kind of all worked out.

KARA

So then tell us what your career trajectory was like. From there. You put your resume in for this entry level position, and you're still at River City today. So what does that look like?

JR

Yeah. So 2005- 2006 is when I started full time, and part of my title is waste and water treatment specialist. So 2008 I went into my father in law's office, whoever told them that's what I like, because of all the heavy concrete and all the civil and structural components of it, and we River City in itself does anywhere from like 50 to one, \$50 million worth of wastewater treatment work in a year to a three year span. So once I asked everything kind of developed from there. It's like, Oh, you want to do this. Okay? So then they just kind of step by step, kind of gave me the runaround to get to where I'm at now, which is I kind of oversee, wow, the bidding and that market in general. I have all the relationships I've built up over time. So it's kind of funny, you know, you start off doing things and you know, I would say, you know, I learned the technical aspect of how I would be doing the job from 2008 to about 2011 and then 2011 I started developing relationships. And, you know, there's a struggle period where you kind of go for a certain amount of time and you're learning all the names and the faces. And you go to conventions and and events, and you meet up with people, you know, person on a personal level, where you go to dinner with them, or something like that. And you get to know everyone in the market. Well, construction markets are interesting in that, you know, schools and higher education, you kind of have an avenue where in higher education, and state of Illinois, you have ISU, which is a state school, there are, you know, certain people you get to know through just doing the work or being part of the work and and you kind of get used to, I guess, the market that you're choosing to be in. So I chose waste and water treatment, mainly because I had some family ties to the market. And, you know, it's, it's a very small, tight knit market where there's six major sections of work that really matter, and then the rest of the stuff is just kind of filling stuff, but there's, there's a lot of specialized equipment in it. So, and that, with my mechanical mind, I I really like that. That was big part of why I chose the market in general. Now I'm just kind of coasting because I know everybody, and it's a little bit

easier, because they call me if they need something, I call them if I need something. So yeah, having those relationships built up is always so helpful.

KARA

And as you mentioned, it really, really takes time to do that. No matter what industry you're in, we do have listeners from all across the college and the university going into different fields. So tell us a little bit more. How would you describe your job to someone outside of the construction industry that might not know what being a water wastewater specialist is all about?

JR

Well, on the construction side of it, it's more about, you know, learning a market, the networking and basically following all where the money leads to. So if there's 10 billion worth of work going out in the nation, you know, we focus on the Midwest, and part of my job is to just make sure that everything I'm focused on is a region that we want to work in. So, Illinois, Iowa, you know, all the border states, the border Illinois, there are different representatives that basically control each market in their function on selling specialized equipment and those type of things. But what I do is I maintain the relationships going into as an estimator, I did a lot of contract work, which is, they have like design build, you know, CM at risk. And then there are, you know, design bid build, which is more conventional, where a municipality will choose a an engineer based on, you know, their design criteria, whatever they need to be done. And there is a something called a State Revolving Fund, and all the municipalities will take out low interest rate loans, and they'll build these plants or renovate existing facilities because of population growth. So if you have a town or a city that is experiencing huge growth, like normal would be right now, with all the rivian stuff. And you know, there's, there's a lot of growth and employment. And so there are a lot of layers to all that. Well, one of the layers is, anytime industry shows up in an area, there are two things that have to happen. You have to be able to flush the water someplace, and you have to be able to drink it. And if there are a lot of people coming into a specific location, all those things have to be upgraded to meet the demand on the population growth. So what I do is I track all that stuff and basically pick and choose the right projects for what we do, which

is, we're a general contractor. So we go in and we we've been out these public let jobs for municipalities and for private entities like American Water and and so we, we specialize in that work, and we specialize in other things too, but my focus was generally just wastewater treatment. But I do all sorts of things. I do parking decks and universities. I mean, we, I played a little bit of part after I graduated from ISU in the Kinesiology Center, which is the McCormick Hall, I think so that was a fun project. It's a nice staple on the campus. I told my sister, you know, we were going to demo our dorms, which is Dunbarton, before they built that building. And she was kind of sad about that. I go, well, all your memories, don't forget, you know, your brother is going to build like a new, you know, a new facility in its place. So it'll be, you know, another memory. But so, I don't know if that explain it well enough, but...

KARA

Yeah I think that's a great peek behind the scenes. And I always love to hear those ties to campus. And I will say that Dunbarton project specifically, I know a lot of alumni were sad to see that go. You know, so many great memories in that building, but with the construction project, they really did a great job keeping a lot of that history alive in the facility. So hopefully it was kind of a win win for everybody.

JR

We think so, it was. An interesting project in that it was so far over budget, they thought they were gonna have to rebid it, and it was bid with separate primes, which what that means is all the mechanical, electrical and plumbing trades bid separately to the university, and we bid a general construction package. And at the time we had come up with, you know, a certain number of millions of dollars or whatever, and we were just short, like, by a million bucks or something. So we called all the apparent low bidders on the mechanical, electrical and plumbing side, and they they end up coming up with enough value engineering, which value engineering is coming up with good ideas to reduce the cost of the project, and so we came up with enough ideas to make the project go. So it was a very memorable job. It was nice to be a part of it, because if it would have went for rebid, you probably wouldn't have gotten all the different design issues taken

care of to make the project go. So it it was just kind of, it's a nice project. Nice to look back on something like that, absolutely.

KARA

So tell us what is your favorite part of your job? What do you get excited about?

JR

So the main things that I do as an estimator is I bid a lot of projects, which means I take pricing from subcontractors and vendors, and I put our own self reform work on in terms of value, and then we submit a price, you know, to go do the work. And sometimes we're successful and sometimes we're not, but the bidding aspect of it is like, like skydiving, everything comes so hard and fast. You have, like, five minutes to go before you have to turn something in to an owner or whatever, and there's just a huge adrenaline rush to do it. And we always talk about stress sweating, which is, you know, when you're working on the jobs, and you know, everything's coming in steadily, and you get into the end of it, and you're just like, you're so focused, it's almost like a thrill to try to bid jobs. And when you love construction in general, you know, it makes it that much more positive to be like, you know, I did all, I put all this work into this, you know, to present a proposal to an owner. And in all of that, we just get a big thrill out of it. Because if you're low, you're just like, Oh no, what did I miss? And if you're not low, you're like, well, on to the next one. So being low is you think it would be a relief, but it's not.

KARA

So then tell us on the flip side, what do you consider to be the most challenging thing about your job?

JR

I think it's maintaining relationships. When you're becoming so busy with all the day to day you kind of forget all the face time you have with people, and that's part of doing the job too. You have to have face time. I always tell the younger guys in the office and like, you know, if you spend time with someone face to face, it's way more important than,

you know, talking to somebody on the phone to actually know someone you know. That makes a world of difference. And doing our jobs and covid was a terrible time because you couldn't really get out and meet with people. I mean, you could, to a certain extent, but it was just a different time to go through all that and you realize how important those relationships are when you can't, you know, touch everybody on a regular basis and just get up to date on, you know, how their family's doing, how these because it's construction in general, is very personal. All the- you know, everybody has a piece in the game. We call it. They have skin in the game, so they have investment. And they've invested their time and their sweat making some of these projects go and it's, it's just, it's very important to realize, you know, you're not the only person in the show. It's like all these people make a difference, you know, towards getting something to be a final product. You know, buildings that people see for 100 years. You know, that's- that's important.

KARA

Absolutely. Well, Jr, we are going to finish here with a speed round. So just go with your first instinct on these questions. Are you a morning person or a night owl? Definitely morning person. Well, and that leads right into my next question, coffee or tea? What gets you going

JR

both? I like, you know, coffee in the morning, tea in the afternoon, but I like it where my grandma used to always say, make it black enough so I can't see the bottom of the cup.

KARA

And then tell me what's your favorite season?

JR

I would say I probably like the summer, just due to the fact that we get outside and I can get my kids out and get out of the house and, oh, normally we'll go on vacation summertime. So probably summer.

KARA

And then tell me what are you reading or listening to right now? Anything we should add to our list?

JR

I'm reading Moby Dick, which, you know, I would suggest it for some but not all. I like the allegory to it. Listening to- I kind of just do a lot of Netflix by Bluetooth, you know, while I'm working. But not that that's a good thing.

KARA

What's your favorite thing to cook for dinner?

JR

I like spaghetti. It's simple. It's easy to make, and my kids like it, so I don't have to hear about them wanting something else.

KARA

Yeah, it's a win for everybody. That's for sure. What's the best trip you've ever taken?

JR

Well, I'll, I'll answer that with two things. The best trip I've ever taken is all, we always go to Amelia Island in Florida. It's a barrier island off Jacksonville on the northeastern part of Florida. And where I would like to go is Scotland, but I have not had the chance to go over there yet.

KARA

Both great answers. And then Jr, I ask everybody that comes on the podcast, Avanti gondola or pub two cheese balls,

JR

probably Avanti gondola.

KARA

And one last question for you, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

JR

I would say, Find a mentor that's willing to invest their time in them.

KARA

Great advice. Thank you, and thanks again for being here. That was Jr Peterson, senior estimator, water wastewater specialist for River City Construction. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.