AWS Celebrates Its Past by Focusing on the Industry’s Bright Future

The Welding Journal is celebrating its centennial by looking to the future and showcasing the welding industry’s young professionals. From January to December, 2019, Society News will profile AWS members under the age of 40 from each AWS District.

The following section profiles Stephen Leone, Dist. 5, and Erich Haun, Dist. 6. To nominate an AWS member, contact Katie Pacheco at kpacheco@aws.org.

District 5 Member Profile

Stephen Leone’s entrance into the world of welding took place in secret. Landing a construction job after high school, he took special notice of the work the shop’s welder was doing. As the foreman, he began staying late after he had locked up to “tinker” with the welding machine.

“I had asked my boss about it before, and he said he didn’t have the time to show me, so I took it upon myself to learn,” explained Leone.

When the boss discovered what Leone had been up to, he wasn’t too happy. However, Leone’s determination combined with his self-taught skills were difficult to ignore.

“He eventually caught me one night and was upset; however, I showed him I could strike an arc and knew the basics, so he took me under his wing and mentored me in all he knew about welding.”

Since then, Leone has done “a little bit of it all.” Some of his welding projects have included production railcars, construction and repair, maintenance, fabrication and furniture, bridges, pipe assemblies, and brewery components. Looking back, he sometimes reminisces about the good ol’ days out in the field.

“I had a construction job as a maintenance welder where I could be welding the axle of a pump truck that split and the next day be welding on giant excavator buckets in the mud and rain,” he said. “There was something about that job; it had the uniqueness of being different every day coupled with the critical thinking and problem-solving aspect that I still miss to this day.”

Leone graduated from Georgia Trade School, where he currently works. A year after he graduated, at the age of 24, he was offered a job at the school as a substitute teacher. Today he teaches structural, pipe, and thin metal welding, as well as print reading and fabrication.

“Knowing I had experience prior to coming to receive my certifications, they eventually asked me if I wanted to stay on full time,” he said.

Leone enjoys changing students’ views on the welding industry, as well as seeing them graduate and move on to well-paying welding jobs.

“The most rewarding facet of teaching is seeing these young men and women go on to make a living and eventually a family. They all come in with a preconceived notion that not going to college makes them a ‘construction worker’ or not ‘intelligent,’ and it is my utmost joy to shatter that mold,” he affirmed. “Seeing them years down the road traveling and having kids, or at the age of 18 making $40,000 and moving out of their parents’ home, is very satisfying.”

Leone’s students follow an all-encompassing curriculum that prepares them for real-world welding.

“We have them make a complex box, cube, T-joint, and pipe-to-plate project. We also have them fabricate things around the shop as needed, and they get to be a part of projects of their own that they or their families want to make,” he explained. “We have a list of fab projects in the curriculum that really help them be prepared for the workforce.”

Recently, at the age of 27, Leone became an AWS Certified Welding Inspector.

“I’m constantly pushing myself to always learn and move forward and up,” he said. “Discipline and hard work always pays off, no matter what you do.”

Living by that adage, Leone competes as a powerlifter at the local and state levels. He credits God and his wife of five years for his success.

Stephen Leone lies down to weld a major pedestrian bridge column support.
District 6 Member Profile

Born into the family business, welding has played a crucial role in Erich Haun’s life ever since he could remember. Haun Welding Supply, a fourth-generation business that distributes welding supplies, industrial supplies, and compressed and liquid gases, was where Haun happily spent much of his childhood, helping in any way he could.

“When I was 4–5 [years old] running around and bothering the store employees, they’d give me a dust rag and have me clean shelves to keep me busy,” he explained. “Not knowing what most of the products were, I made sure the shelves were stocked and arranged well.”

The shop wasn’t just his playground, he also learned valuable lessons about running a business and loss prevention.

“Crawling around on the ground, I often found inventory that had been kicked under the racks and lost. On one cleaning, my Grandpa told me I found over $100 in lost inventory. That was the first time I realized the value of contact tips and how quickly the cost adds up,” he said.

When he wasn’t at the family business, Haun dedicated himself to the Boy Scouts of America, where his father served as Scout Master. However, Haun lost interest when his brothers became Eagle Scouts and exceeded the age of eligibility. He left the Scouts two merit badges short of being an Eagle Scout, the highest rank in the program.

“Looking back, I see the Boy Scouts as one of the most valuable experiences of my young life. Scouting helped me develop problem-solving skills that seem to be important in everything I do,” he explained.

When he reached legal working age, Haun became an official employee of the family business. He began working in the warehouse, where he shipped and received merchandise, then moved on to helping with sales on the showroom floor.

“My freshman year in college, I would ride my bike five miles to our Williston, Vermont, store and help three days a week with sales,” he said. Despite the success of his family business, Haun felt the need to delve into something new and carve out a name for himself. Leaving the welding industry for four years, Haun eventually came to run a paint business.

“I needed to prove to myself that I could be successful outside the realm of our family business,” he affirmed. “My senior year in college I had 35 employees, half of whom were older than me. This was a valuable experience, reinforcing how important it was to have the right people I could rely on to be caretakers of the business.”

While running the paint business, Haun completed a bachelor’s in business administration from the University of Vermont, with a concentration in human resources.

Armed with a degree, Haun returned to the family business, which has 19 locations and about 250 employees. He is currently the company’s executive vice president, but he doesn’t like placing too much emphasis on his job title.

“I hate titles; my business card doesn’t have one. When I introduce myself, it’s typically just by first name,” he said. “I want people to know me for me and trust that I can deliver whether or not my name is on the building.”

According to Haun, his day-to-day tasks include coaching employees, helping to solve issues, and identifying efficiencies in the business.

“The two favorite parts of my day are empowering people to be more effective and working with customers directly to overcome their problems,” he said.

In his role, Haun pays special attention to the company’s employees, recognizing that motivated employees are the bedrock of success.

“Our people are the most valuable part of our business; it’s important for us to continually reinvest in our people so that we’re adding value to the industry,” he said.

When he isn’t guiding employees, Haun dedicates his time to bolstering the industry as the second vice chair of the American Welding Society (AWS) Northern New York Section, where he helps coordinate meetings, generate meeting notices, and guide young people who are entering the industry.

“Most of the time, I’m trying to spread the word to the youth in the industry and to help share the connections that I’ve been lucky enough to make,” said Haun. “The more exposure we all have to the industry helps create opportunities that might not have presented themselves without the comradery of the AWS.”

He takes pleasure in serving the Section because of the opportunities and connections it affords, as well as the inside look it provides into the industry.

“I love the industry. It’s so neat the places we can go and the things that we see that the general public can’t/doesn’t not. Working as an AWS chair helps me make connections in the industry with other vendors, customers, and competitors. I think most people would be surprised to know the things that are made in our area and the people behind it. Being involved in the AWS and the welding industry helps pull back the curtain on what really happens in our local economy,” he explained.

To unwind, Haun enjoys the outdoors, but he admits that welding is never too far from his brain.

“If you can’t find me at work, hopefully I’m lost in Vermont, hiking, skiing, or swimming,” he affirmed. “But who are we kidding? There is no ‘off’ switch for us; welding and gas are everywhere.”

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