

people to know

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

When one adventure is thwarted,
another often takes its place.

THOMAS VOSSMEYER is president of one of the largest structural steel detailing and connection design firms in the world.

Interestingly, though, he came into detailing almost by accident while attending trade school.

“I signed up for drafting because auto mechanics class was full,” he laughs.

His experience in finding his first job was similar, and he recalls going through the phone book and calling prospective employers.

“There weren’t a lot of detailers listed in the book at the time,” he says. “I got to the W’s and came across Walden Detailing.”

Vossmeier was hired at Walden and spent the next three years with the company, learning steel detailing. From Walden he went to work for Stupp Brothers and also earned a Bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. After stints at PKM and AFSCO Steel, he went to work for an engineering firm in St. Louis, where he started a detailing division. He ran the division for three years then in 2003 started International Design Services, Inc. (IDS)—an AISC member detailer based outside of St. Louis—where he is president and chief engineer.

IDS, like most companies, was effected by the recent recession. Layoffs were an unfortunate reality and it became a struggle to maintain work for the remaining staff. However, with the addition of a sales department (something the company had never had in the past) plus a philosophy of leaving no stone unturned in looking for jobs and new customers, IDS eventually bounced back and now employs more than 460 and achieved record revenues in 2012.

Grounded

Vossmeier travels extensively for his company. And when it comes to travel, everyone has a good story about a bad experience—how their luggage got lost, how they missed a connection or how they had to spend the night in an airport and resort to vending machines for dinner because everything was closed.

But in the spring of 2010, Vossmeier was one of the

multitudes of airline passengers that got the opportunity to one-up their traveling peers with some variation of the statement “My plane was delayed due to a volcano.”

That spring, Vossmeier had traveled to Helsinki to visit Tekla; IDS is collaborating with Tekla to develop a connection design software package. His plan was to spend a couple of days in Helsinki meeting with Tekla, then travel Western Europe for a week. However, the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland had different plans. In mid-April the volcano erupted and launched a massive ash cloud (30,000 ft high!) into the atmosphere, wreaking havoc on air travel across much of Europe for a week and forcing millions of travelers to cancel or extend their trips.

The eruption took place toward the end of Vossmeier’s stint in Helsinki. He was sitting in the lobby of his hotel, the business portion of his trip completed, when his COO came in and told him, “You aren’t going anywhere.” Then he briefed him on the volcano.

“Volcano? I looked outside and it was a beautiful day,” he recalls. “So I went to the front desk and, sure enough, all the flights were cancelled, but they told me that planes would be up in the air by the next day. So I thought, ‘Oh, well, one less day in London.’ But every day I went down to the front desk, and every day they told me the same thing. The rest of my trip kept getting shorter and shorter, and then I realized it just wasn’t going to happen.”

What did end up happening was an unexpected and rewarding adventure. The hotel suggested that given the air travel situation, why not take a trip to Tallinn, Estonia, which was just a short ferry ride away?

“Tallinn wasn’t on my radar at all,” Vossmeier laughs. “But we could take a boat there, so we gave it a go.”

He spent two days in Tallinn, marveling at the 13th Century-era city walls and towers of the historic town center, taking in dinner and a show at an ancient building that once served as a warehouse and enjoying the relative lack of crowds.

“Apparently the place is typically crawling with tourists, but it was like we almost had the place to ourselves,” he says. “Because of the volcano, no one could get there.”

Following the excursion, Vossmeier returned to Helsinki then eventually home, disappointed to miss the rest of his trip but grateful for the serendipitous visit to Estonia.

“If we hadn’t been grounded by the volcano, we never would have thought to visit Tallinn,” he says (and last year he was able to fulfill the rest of his European tour).

Regardless of the obstacle—whether it’s full classes, an economic downturn or even an honest-to-god volcano—Vossmeier has become a firm believer in the idea of making the best of opportunities as they come.

“Don’t just stand on the edge of the pool, jump in,” he exclaims. “If it’s the wrong thing to do, you can correct it, but keep going. Don’t look back.”

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◀ Thomas Vossmeier, president of International Design Services.