Foundation of the Wall and Ceiling Industry:
Providing Information and Help to the Public

Editor’s Note: The Foundation of the Wall and Ceiling Industry is a nonprofit organization established to support research, educational benefits, and information for the good of the public and the industry. The Foundation operates a free Information Hotline, open to members as well as the general public, providing information and research assistance in the wall and ceiling area. The Hotline can be reached at (703) 548-0374.

We spoke with FWCI Executive Director Kathy Sedgwick recently to learn more about the Foundation and its function.

Construction Dimensions: Could you describe the Foundation and the purposes it seeks to serve?

Kathy Sedgwick: The Foundation is a nonprofit education and research organization that was formed in 1978 by a group of industry leaders who were active with the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries. They saw a need for an organization that would do work that would benefit the industry and the public, but they were thinking in terms of activities that weren’t really appropriate for a traditional trade association. They formed the Foundation as an affiliated organization.

Our purpose is to benefit the industry by working in the following ways: publication of technical information, sponsoring research efforts in technical areas and supporting education that relates to the industry through scholarships and grants for research projects. We’ve taken the education support a step further; in addition to the scholarships, we also work with architecture professors and assist with curriculum development for architecture and some training schools to try to make sure that information about new materials and new technology is made available to the teachers so that they can then train the students. Our work in the education area has been one of our most important functions. Obviously, it will be a while before some of the students get out into the field and start applying the information and knowledge we have disseminated, but we think the long-range benefits are well worth the effort.

CD: How does the Foundation differ from AWCI itself in terms of its goals and objectives?

Sedgwick: Basically, we are here to benefit the public and the industry at large. If a homeowner has a question about the construction of his house, or if a commercial building owner needs information about specific construction techniques, the Foundation will do what it can to help them find the answers to their questions or point them to others who might have answers. Membership in the Foundation is not a requirement to receive our assistance.

AWCI, on the other hand, exists primarily to benefit its members, the contractors, manufacturers and suppliers who are directly involved in the
industry.

CD: What is the tax status of the Foundation?

Sedgwick: Under the U.S. Tax code, we are considered a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization, which has the connotation of being a charitable organization. That means, basically, that when people contribute to the Foundation the contribution is tax deductible as a charitable contribution. When an organization pays dues to AWCI, which has a different tax designation, those dues are deductible as a business expense rather than a charitable contribution.

CD: You mentioned maintaining the library as one of the primary purposes of the Foundation.

Sedgwick: The John H. Hampshire Memorial Research and Reference Library was one of the first projects that the leadership of the Foundation undertook. They saw a very important opportunity for us to serve many people by acting as an information clearinghouse. At the time, there really wasn’t one place that collected information on walls and ceilings. Different organizations like the Metal Lath/Steel Framing Association or the Gypsum Association had publications available on their distinct sectors of the industry, and there were bits and pieces in different places. It was suggested that by pulling these things together in some kind of organized fashion, more people would have access to the data they needed.

The library was formally established in 1981. The Foundation had received a large gift from the family of John H. Hampshire, and that money was used to furnish the library. So we’re celebrating the 10th anniversary of the library this year.

CD: Are you looking for submissions to the library?

Sedgwick: Yes, we’re using the 10th anniversary as a way to call attention to the fact that we’ve been around for quite a while. Ten years is a long time for this kind of service. We are unique in that we may be the only place in the world where someone could find some of the materials that are in our library. For example, we have back issues of *Plastering Industries* and some of the older periodicals that can’t be found anywhere else.

People who are involved in renovation work might want to research recipes for plaster that they are trying to duplicate. They might not be able to find those recipes anywhere else but here.

We’ve also been fortunate in that a number of retired industry leaders have donated their libraries to us. In fact, last year we received a large contribution from Richard N. Parker (now deceased). He essentially turned over to us all of his files from his years with the Metal Lath/Steel Framing Association. These contain many historically important records of the fire tests that were carried out as early as the 1930s. These will be an important resource in the development of our fire rated wall assemblies publication, which is being completed now.

CD: The Foundation produces a number of publications, often in conjunction with AWCI and other groups. How do these evolve?

Sedgwick: Essentially, we track the calls and requests we receive on specific topics. Sometimes we discover there really isn’t anything appropriate that addresses the caller’s needs. When we hear these same questions asked again and again, the Foundation leadership determines whether or not we can fill this need by developing a publication.

For example, the library had received many calls about lead-based paint (LBP) removal. To answer these questions, we put together a free information kit which included a summary of related legislative activity, a copy of a model state regulation, a bibliography of published reports and articles about LBP, plus a directory of other information sources. Our tolerance manual is such a compilation document.

Many of the ideas for publications come from the AWCI technical subcommittees. Those members see the need for technical publications and
The Foundation has had a booth at different conventions.

We do a great deal of the development work.

Recently we have focused on compilation works. People may be looking for everything they can find on a specific subject, and it’s scattered around in many different publications so we try to pull it together in one place.

CD: Say one of AWCI’s technical subcommittees suggested a topic for you to explore or a resource that was needed. You’d certainly look into it, wouldn’t you?

Sedgwick: Certainly. Depending on fund availability and what we have on our agenda—where we’ve decided we’ll be able to spend our limited funds during the time period the project would be under development—we would definitely explore such requests.

For example, in 1990 AWCI’s Technical Subcommittee #4 had nearly completed revising the fireproofing inspection manual (12A), and they were ready to publish it. Unfortunately, it wasn’t feasible at the time for AWCI to publish it for financial reasons. The Foundation had some money set aside for new publications, and we were asked to take on the project. We published it jointly with AWCI; any profits that we make on the sale of the manual will be split with AWCI.

The same is true with the tolerance manual. That started out as a project of the AWCI Task Force on Tolerances over a three-year period. The manual is a compilation document that pulls together all of the tolerances mentioned in nearly 50 different sources. The manual helps the contractor or the architect or the specifier—whoever’s on the jobsite—to find the tolerances all in one place without having to carry his entire library with him.

CD: Who comprises the Foundation’s Board of Directors?

Sedgwick: We have a 14-member Board, and each member serves a three-year term. Six of them are elected by the Foundation membership, seven by the AWCI membership, and one is nominated by the Ceilings and Interior Systems Construction Association (CISCA) and elected by the Foundation membership.

CD: So you work closely with AWCI’s leaders and members.

Sedgwick: To a great extent. The majority of our members are also members of AWCI.

CD: You mentioned another of the Foundation’s purposes is to answer questions from the general pub-
lic. How many such questions do you receive in an average week?

**Sedgwick:** Many of the calls we handle on the Foundation information hotline are actually calls that are transferred from AWCI. They may be association members that called in, or professional researchers, or even a “Harry Homeowner.” For one reason or another, their call is transferred to the Foundation. We probably get 20 to 30 such calls in a week. Other people that have been referred to us by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) or some other construction-related association may constitute 10 or 20 calls a week. So we handle a total of nearly 50 calls a week. Some of these calls are fairly simple--such as “What is ASTM’s address?” Others may be as complicated as “What recipes for plaster used horse’s hair as opposed to sisal fiber prior to the 1930s?” We try to respond to all questions within 24 hours.

**CD:** If I call the Information Hotline, how is my call handled?

**Sedgwick:** The first thing we generally do is search our computer for appropriate documents. (We have the entire library catalog on computer.) For example, if someone calls in with a question on exterior insulation we can tell right away that we have, say, 75 books, reports and videos on that subject. We can then scan through the titles and determine which ones are most likely to have the specific data that is needed. We also have Construction Dimensions technical articles on computer, indexed back to 1976. (We are in the process of indexing articles a year at a time, going backwards.) Then we can scan through the articles and see which ones are applicable.

If we don’t find enough material to answer their question, then we’ll contact other organizations that might have the information. We frequently call the Census Bureau or organizations such as the National Institute of Building Sciences (NIBS).

We have been able to participate with several groups of information specialists, one that is specifically for construction-related libraries. There are several such libraries in the Washington, D.C. area, including the American Institute of Architects, the Construction Specifications Institute, and NAHB. We have worked with people in these libraries and they have been very cooperative. These libraries are not necessarily open to the public the way we are; often they provide information only to their members, but we are able to get access for our callers in exchange for having helped their libraries in the past.

Another source of information is a group of association foundations, some of which have information hotlines like ours. We trade information here as well.

**CD:** You also mentioned that the Foundation gives scholarships to deserving students. As an indication of the number of people you reach, how many applications for the scholarships do you receive?

**Sedgwick:** We have received an average of about 150 applications each year for the past three years.

**CD:** What kinds of backgrounds do these student applicants have? What do they major in?

**Sedgwick:** Many of them are architecture students, although the scholarships are intended for any students pursuing construction-related careers. There seem to be many architecture students aware of sources for financial aid, so that may be why more of them come from that area.

We have awarded scholarships to students who are entering vocational training as well, and it’s a goal of the Board to try to increase the percentage of applications we receive from students in vocational or construction-trades programs. It’s not that we have a prejudice against architecture students, we just want to make sure that the people who will be doing the hands-on work in the field also receive the financial help we offer.

**CD:** What else does the Foundation do in the education field to help the industry?

**Sedgwick:** We try to provide appropriate classroom materials and act as a speakers bureau. For example, we helped a local chapter find speakers on technical subjects for their monthly meetings. In the past we participated in the American Collegiate School of Architecture Construction Technology Institute, where many of the top architecture professors from around the country come to learn about new technology. The professors there told us they didn’t have access to the latest information on technology in the industry, at least...
not in a form they could easily use in the classroom. We knew they weren’t getting enough information about lightweight steel framing, particularly using panelization. So we put together an 18-minute video tape that could be used in the architecture classroom called “Curtainwall Construction.”

Since then, we’ve found that contractors are using this videotape for sessions with architects and specifiers to sell them on what our industry people can do. The video has been very popular as an introduction to the basics of lightweight steel framing and the advantages of panelizing with it for contractors who are considering branching into that field. Manufacturers have also used it to help train new sales people.

Our efforts in the education area may not be readily apparent for some time; in the case of the classroom materials and scholarships, we may not see any results until these students get out of school and into the field. We hope we’re making a difference, however.

CD: Where does the Foundation get its revenue?

Sedgwick: Obviously the work we do costs money. Often acquisitions for the library can be quite expensive. In addition, we have general operating expenses such as rent, salaries, etc.

We have two major sources of income: membership dues and the funds we raise at our annual auction, which is held at the AWCI convention. Foundation membership dues have caused some confusion, because many AWCI members believe the Foundation receives a percentage of their AWCI membership dues. That is not the case. We are entirely dependent on the voluntary contributions given to the Foundation directly-member dues and funds from the auction.

CD: The auction is very successful.

Sedgwick: Yes it is, and we’re very proud of that success. We hope San Francisco will be another big year so that we can continue to do our work. We’re counting on a big turnout at the convention.

We see the auction as a good way to get people interested in the Foundation—and raise funds too, of course. The net proceeds from the auction account for about 30% of our annual income. Membership dues account for 58%.

We’ve been fortunate in past years when individuals and families, like John Hampshire’s family, have made memorial contributions and bequests to the Foundation. In fact three years ago we combined all of those memorial funds into a scholarship endowment fund. It’s our goal within the next five years to increase the size of that endowment fund to make the scholarship program self-funded—that is, the endowment fund will be large enough to generate interest income sufficient to fund the scholarships. Right now we’re spending $7500 a year to fund the scholarships, and this money is coming out of our general operating expenses.

CD: The Foundation also gives out an award.

Sedgwick: Yes, the J.D. McNulty Award. It was started by AWCI some years ago to recognize contractors for their work in research and development. Last year the Foundation took on the job of selecting a winner.

We give the McNulty Award to a contractor or other individual who has contributed to the industry in the areas of education, research and development, or information dissemination. Last year we gave it to South Texas Drywall in Columbus, Ohio, for developing a beadless corner system which was described in Construction Dimensions magazine last year.

This year the award will be presented at the AWCI Awards Breakfast.

*The family of Howard Troy donated quite a large sum in his honor. This money was used to subsidize production of the curtainwall video.*