Small brush with fame

One of the most treasured awards I received from CSI is the Ben John Small Memorial Award. First presented in 1996, and limited to one per year, only eleven people have received this award.

The award, originally intended "to honor those who have achieved outstanding stature and proficiency as specifiers," is named after Ben John Small, charter member and president of the Metropolitan New York Chapter. Ben was well known as an educator; he was a frequent lecturer at Columbia University, Princeton University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. He wrote columns for *Pencil Points Magazine*, which later became *Progressive Architecture*. He also wrote a number of books, including *Architectural Practice, Building check list, and Streamlined specifications standards*. (I have two of these books in my library.)

A couple of years after receiving the award, I was at the CSI office in Alexandria for an Institute board meeting. I recalled seeing an article about Ben John Small in the *Construction Specifier*, but all I could remember was that his son worked at the Smithsonian. I had a little extra time before my flight, so I went to the Smithsonian in hopes of meeting him.

I started my search at the information desk. "I'm looking for someone named Small. Do you know where I could find him?"

With a somewhat stern look, the receptionist replied, "Mr. Small is on the hill today. What did you want to see him about?"

I told her the Small I was looking for might be the son of Ben John Small. She asked for my phone number and said she would pass it on. And that, I thought, was that.

Later that day, as I was leaving for the airport, my cell phone rang.

"Is this Sheldon Wolfe?"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"This is Lawrence Small, Secretary of the Smithsonian. I heard you stopped in to see me." You can imagine my surprise as I realized that this wasn't just some guy who worked at the Smithsonian, but the boss!

Mr. Small invited me to come back, but I didn't have time. He then told me to call him in advance the next time I was in Washington. I took him up on his offer and called before the next board meeting. After greeting me on the first floor, he gave me a behind-the-scenes tour of the Castle (the administrative home of the Smithsonian). His office was a museum in itself, with a space suit, the Lone Ranger's mask, a watch that was worn by an astronaut, and several other unique items on display. How much fun would it be to decorate your office with the entire Smithsonian to draw from?!

After talking about a controversial exhibit that included the nose of the *Enola Gay*, the B-19 used to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Lawrence told me an interesting story about the end of World War II. The story involved a pink cap that is part of the "Price of Freedom" exhibit in the Smithsonian. The cap belonged to Sandra Roche, who was born in 1945 in a Japanese internment camp in Weihsien, China (now Weifang). Food in the camp was inadequate, and Sandra developed rickets. The camp was liberated by seven American paratroopers 17 August 1945, just three days after Japan surrendered. Sandra's mother asked the paratroopers to sign the pink cap; she then used blue thread to embroider their signatures onto the cap.

And now, as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story." About twenty years later, Lawrence met Sandra, and they were married in 1967.
Awards often mean little to people who don’t belong to the organization that presents them. While the awards may be appreciated by members of the organization, and may contribute to obtaining other awards or honors, they typically don’t have much impact on the recipient’s job or career. The reason, of course, is that people outside of the organization don’t know about the awards. Most people don’t blow their own horns, so unless someone else does something to publicize awards, they remain secret.

CSI has a great history of preaching to the choir. It’s fine to tell each other about what we’re doing or what we’ve done, but shouldn’t we also tell the rest of the world? If you’re bringing in an expert, a top-notch speaker, or a celebrity to address a chapter meeting, spread the word! The construction community is the obvious target, but there are times when the general public should be invited. Many chapters have had a Frank Lloyd Wright impersonator speak, but how many realized that people who aren’t involved in construction are FLW fans and invited them?

Promoting outside the chapter or region also applies to awards and honors. Awards committees at all levels should make notification part of their process. In most cases, it could be as simple as telling the recipient’s boss about the award. My preference would be to use a card or a letter, but even an email would work. For more important awards, a press release could be sent to local newspapers.

Awards acknowledge the contributions of members within the organization, but they also can be a positive influence on members’ careers.

© 2017, Sheldon Wolfe, RA, FCSI, CCS, CCCA, CSC

Agree? Disagree? Leave your comments at http://swconstructivethoughts.blogspot.com/

For more information...

Pink cap exhibit http://s.si.edu/2pqf2Dz
History of the Weihsien camp www.weihsien-paintings.org/index.htm