

# On the Safe Side

## NUCA's 2006 William H. Feather Safety Award Winners

By Nick Zubko



**A**ny time people are added to an equation, a certain level of human error becomes inevitable. That's why pencils have erasers, right? In reality, the outcome of that error can vary greatly depending on the situation. It's not so bad when a plumber finishes your new bathroom and the faucet on your sink flushes the toilet (actually, that one might be pretty funny). On the other hand, if your accountant puts one decimal point in the wrong place, it could end up costing you a pretty penny.

Simply because of the nature of the business and the sheer risk involved in nearly every project, the stakes in utility construction are even higher. Jobsites are larger, more complicated and increasingly difficult to control. One slipup can result not only in financial devastation, but also in a serious or even fatal injury. That's why safety is such a critical part of any successful utility contractor's business plan.

The National Utility Contractors Association (NUCA) has been recognizing companies for their efforts on the safety front for almost 30 years, establishing the William H. Feather Safety Awards back in 1978. Named for the founding chairman of NUCA's safety committee and a pioneer in safety awareness, the awards were created to recognize a commitment to safety demonstrated by a low frequency of injuries, explicit safety statements and innovative and sophisticated company programs.

Initially bestowed on a single individual or company, the award was later expanded to include contractor members that had the best safety records. The winners are chosen on the basis of information in seven categories established according to total man-hours worked. NUCA presented the winners of the 2006 Feather Awards at its Fourth National Awards Dinner, which was held May 16 in Arlington, Va., during its 2007 Spring Board and Committee Meetings & Washington Summit.

## Overall Winner

### J.F. Wilkerson Contracting Co. Inc. Morrisville, N.C.

When Joe Wilkerson started J.F. Wilkerson Contracting Co. back in 1969, the importance of safety was far from what it is today. Back then, Wilkerson was a young contractor whose main goal was to get the job done quickly and cost-effectively. Safety, he admits, took a back seat. Things changed in a big way, however, when in the early 1970s the *Raleigh News & Observer* published a list of contractors it deemed as the “20 worst offenders” in regard to safe operating practices. J.F. Wilkerson Contracting made the list.

“We were not a safe company in the early years, but seeing our name on that list was a real eye-opener. It was a turning point in my career,” Wilkerson recalls. “For safety to work in any company, the management has to be the first to buy into it. And back then, I didn’t. We were small enough that we hardly had any accidents and no one got hurt, but we started putting a program into place and we have never looked back. We didn’t have all the trench box manufacturers that we have today, so we just made our own.”

Ever since, Wilkerson has worked to convey the importance of safety to everyone else in the company as well. Through frequent reminders of safety fundamentals, those practices have in time become a way of life for the company. Safety meetings are held weekly and before crew members can step foot on a new jobsite, everyone is taken through an intense day of training, focusing on special things to look out for onsite, understanding the trenches and any issues with confined space entry.

“You just can’t call everyone into a meeting once or twice a year to go over all the rules and expect everyone to observe them. It doesn’t work that way,” says Wilkerson. “There has to be constant reinforcement. At one point, we went back and realized that a majority of our injuries were by people who had been with the company only a very short period of time. Taking steps to train and monitor those people more closely was one of the big things that really helped us improve.”

The company’s efforts showed up on NUCA’s radar for the first time in 1990, when J.F. Wilkerson won its first Feather Award, again taking the overall spot. Continuing to strive for improvement, the company has had a written safety program in place for the last 10 years and frequently promotes safety in the construction industry by training subcontractors in OSHA 10, Subpart P and HazCom free of charge. It has also provided industry training and worked with schools to provide equipment for elementary school kids

to see, attended job fairs and train other contractor’s employees.

“When we first started using trench boxes, there was a perception that you couldn’t be productive,” says Wilkerson. “But after using those safety devices for a while, you realize that it doesn’t hurt production at all — you can actually improve it. It’s human nature to fight change. So you will always have resistance, but you just have to explain how necessary it is and when they buy into that, they will incorporate it into the work.”

Another way J.F. Wilkerson combats resistance is by rewarding employees for a job done safely. According to Wilkerson, the compact provides monetary rewards to their employee’s 401K plan at the end of a safe year. For every dollar that an employee puts into the 401K, Wilkerson adds \$1.50. And those rewards are made a little bit easier as a result, as J.F. Wilkerson’s experience modifier has dropped from a pinnacle of 1.8 down around a 0.8. This has made a significant difference in insurance premiums, not to mention greatly improving its image as a safe contractor.

“Before a company can be safe, top management has to believe that a job can be both safe and productive,” says Wilkerson. “And you have to bid jobs high enough to allow them to be completed safely. I see so many young contractors who get the work too cheaply, and the only thing they can do is cut corners to survive. It’s difficult to convey the importance of safety to the young guys today. No one thinks it will happen to them. And many of them have never seen an accident, never had to sit down in a courtroom with OSHA and they simply don’t know the ramifications. If you continue with unsafe practices, eventually someone is going to get injured.”



According to Joe Wilkerson, J.F. Wilkerson Contracting Co.’s founder and president, for a contractor to be truly safe, its top management has to believe that a job can be both safe and productive.



For Western Summit, a good safety record reflects the quality of management, supervision and workforce. Above, Mark Latham, the company's corporate safety director, speaks to a crew about jobsite safety.

**1,000,000-Plus Hours**  
**Western Summit Constructors Inc.**  
*Denver*

Western Summit Constructors Inc. has established a reputation as a leader in the water and wastewater industries, performing high level work for more than 25 years. A critical part of the Western Summit's success has been an established safety and health policy — one so effective that it earned the company the overall Feather Award winner for both 2001 and 2005, and its continued progress is being recognized again this year.

Part of the company's success on the safety front has been credited to its implementation of a People-Based Safety (PBS) program on all of its jobsites. The program encourages craft people to conduct safety observations and identify the level of safety being carried out in the field. Information is entered into a database that allows tracking to take place, enabling management to develop leading indicators that identify areas of concern where the company can then concentrate its efforts.

"We have continued to put a lot of effort into our people-based safety and we're starting to see some results," says Mark Latham, Western Summit's corporate safety director. "It's really the start of a longer journey, but it is definitely getting our field people involved in safety. More and more of our people are out in the field as observers, looking for safe and at-risk behaviors."

Western Summit has increased training efforts on job safety assessment and hazard assessment, involving more

and more members if its crew. In addition, the company's large number of Spanish-speaking workers has also been addressed, hiring its first bilingual safety trainer more than two years ago, and hiring a second just last year.

Western Summit believes safety should not be sacrificed for production, but rather considered an integral part of quality control, cost reduction and job efficiency. While the ultimate success of a safety and health program depends upon the full cooperation of each individual employee, Latham says it is management's responsibility to see that safety and health rules and procedures are adequate and enforced and to see that effective training and educational programs are employed to the greatest advantage.

"You need to have the support from the top; there has to be that vision and leadership with clear expectations," says Latham. "But there is no one-size-fits-all safety program. Even within our own company, different jobsites have to be approached differently.

Some jobs are larger than others and have a dedicated training trailer. On the smaller jobs, you're training out of the back of a pickup."

According to Latham, every one of Western Summit's supervisors is aware of safety performance demonstrated by the employees under his or her supervision. A good safety record not only reflects the quality of management, supervision and workforce, but also serves to promote business and thereby contributes to the continuing growth and success of the company.

"Being recognized is kind of a validation from your peers that you are heading in the right direction," says Latham. "Until you get to zeroes, you know you still have work to do. And then when you get to zeroes, it takes even more effort to stay there. But [receiving these awards] is definitely a form of validation that what we have in place is working."

**500,001-1,000,000 Hours**  
**Alex E. Paris Contracting Co. Inc.**  
*Atlasburgh, Pa.*

Founded in 1928, Alex E. Paris Contracting Co. is a full service heavy construction firm with an equipment division and an industrial service division. The company provides almost any type of construction or industrial services needed and employs more than 200 people. Today, the company's safety program represents a continuum of loss control measures ranging from preplanning/site determination to implementation, follow-up and improvement activities.

“Our health and safety policy influences all work activities, from the selection of people, equipment and materials, to the way work is done and how we design and complete our projects,” says Bill Santa, the company's safety coordinator. “And we continue to improve in the area of safety with the belief that safety and accident prevention are to be managed like any other function of the organization.”

According to Santa, the element with the most significant impact on the success of the company's safety program has been its team approach. All employees receive regular training to support the safety program and are encouraged to participate in safety and loss prevention efforts, in order to take full advantage of their knowledge of how improvements can be made.

In addition to maintaining an active safety committee that represents all operational functions, Alex E. Paris Contracting relies on active measurements of its safety performance to determine if the program is



Planning is the key to making health and safety efforts work, according to Bill Santa, safety coordinator for Alex E. Paris Contracting. That means setting objectives, identifying hazards, assessing risks and implementing standards of performance.

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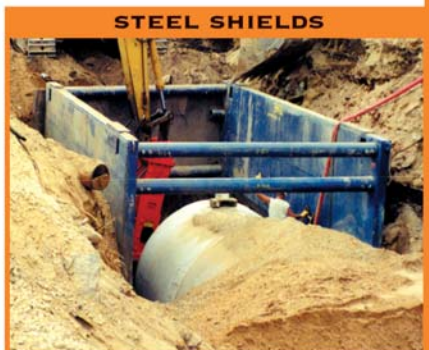
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successful. The safety program is regularly inspected and audited to ensure that standards are being implemented and management controls are working.

“Planning is the key to ensuring that our health and safety efforts really work,” Santa says. “That means setting objectives, identifying hazards, assessing risks, implementing standards of performance and developing a positive culture. We continue to monitor our safety program to ensure that it supports our productivity and quality goals. In years past, the two goals were considered mutually exclusive. We now integrate safety production and quality to support our operational goals.”

At Alex E. Paris Contracting, priority is given to areas where the risks are the greatest. Management looks closely at serious events and those with potential for serious harm. The utility construction industry has in the past relied on a reactive approach, says Santa, but for the industry to excel, proactive metrics need to be monitored before things go wrong.

“Most traditional safety programs have operated on the belief that hindsight is 20/20 — investigating after things go wrong; our company has moved beyond the reactionary mode and for the industry to progress, a similar approach is essential,” he adds. “You need to ensure that information from proactive and reactive monitoring is used to identify situations that create risks, and do something about them.”

## **200,001-500,000 Hours** **Sundance Mechanical & Utility Corp.** *Albuquerque, N.M.*

Founded by Mike Mechenbrier in 1979, Sundance Mechanical & Utility Corp. specializes in water line, sewer line and storm sewer installations, in addition to concrete curbing and gutter and asphalt paving. Over the years, a key the company's safety program has been its Supervisors Safety Accountability Program, which transfers the responsibility for worker safety to the workers supervisor.

While Sundance's management has always been the guide for safety, its record improved dramatically when the supervisors were made accountable for each member of their crews more than 12 years ago. Ever since, each member of the Sundance team has accepted safety as an integral part of the business. According to Ed Burroughs, safety accountability is simply being responsible for what you do. And supervisors need to identify what they expect their people to accomplish.

“Our goal is to not have any accidents while making a profit,” says Burroughs. “If you are serious, you keep score. A group that does not measure what it produces is not effective. Accountability requires precise data on



At Sundance, each supervisor's Christmas bonus is enriched or reduced based on their safety performance. Company president Ed Burroughs says that just the stigma of being below average can be a great motivator.

what you have or have not done. Proper use of consequences (rewards, applause, praise and incentives) is the fuel of accountability. Without consequences, accountability is without substance.”

Sundance's supervisor safety accountability program measures seven items; six are definitive items as follows: employee orientation, tool box talks, safety meetings attended, timely notice of loss, accident investigation and accident or incident rate. These are all “yes or no” items (either it was done or it wasn't) that are graded as a percentage of optimum.

The seventh item is safety attitude. Sundance employees grade their supervisor by answering eight questions on the usefulness and sincerity of his safety efforts. The results are tabulated and a percentage grade is computed for each supervisor and an average is computed of the total scores.

At an annual supervisor's safety lunch in December, the results of the last year are presented and each supervisor receives a detailed graphic tabulation of their scores. Each supervisor's Christmas bonus is enriched 3 percent for each point he is above the average, or reduced by the amount he is below the average.

According to Burroughs, the amount of penalty or enrichment is not great, but the stigma of being below average is a great motivator — especially in a group setting.

“Prior to starting the accountability program, our experience modifier was 1.85 and its insurance premium for workers compensation was around \$400,000 every year,” he explains. “The safety program has reduced that modifier to 0.77 and the insurance premium to \$100,000 a year. As a result of this our safety program is credited as saving \$300,000 a year for Sundance. There is no better reason for having a safety program.”

## 100,001-200,000 Hours

DeKalb Pipeline Co. Inc.

Conyers, Ga.

Since creating its safety program 14 years ago, DeKalb Pipeline Co. has been a safety-oriented company, continually striving for excellence in this area of the business. The effort showed, as DeKalb has been fortunate not to have had any jobsite accidents over the last nine years.

As a result, the company has been the recipient of a Feather Award several times over, including category spots in 1998, 2001, 2003 and 2005, and the overall winner in 2002 and 2004. But according to company president James King, DeKalb's safety program has continued to improve and maintain an accident-free work environment.

"We have made it a top priority to send our employees to refresher safety courses," says King. "The element we feel has had the most impact is our ability to keep our employees trained. Training is one of the most valuable benefits you can offer your employees. It not only shows that safety is important to you as a manager, but also that you have genuine concern for the employee."

For DeKalb, it is imperative to make safety training as accessible and as easy as possible. The company's local association, the Georgia Utility Contractors Association, offers jobsite safety classes that make the process easier for both employer and employee. In recent years, part of its challenge has been training Spanish-speaking employees in their native language. DeKalb looks to



Over the last nine years, DeKalb has received a Feather Award an impressive seven times (including twice as overall winner). Even so, company president James King says there is always work to be done on the safety front.



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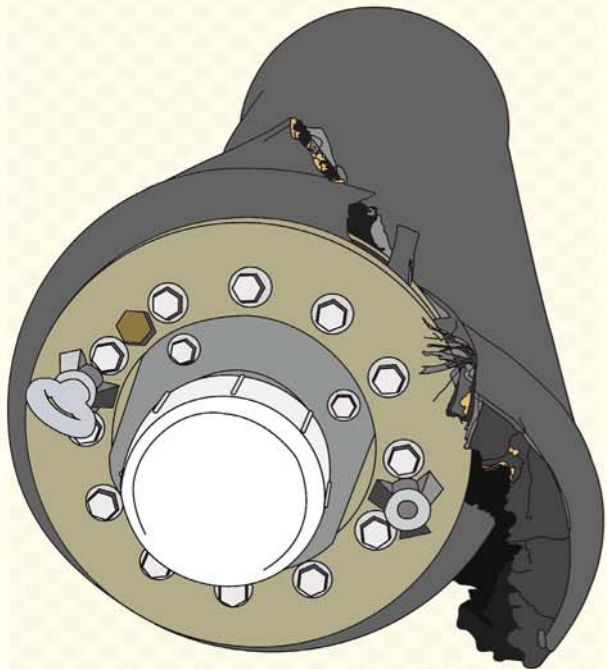
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GUCA for this, because the association offers a variety of classes in Spanish.

According to King, the perception of safety was perceived as a hindrance in the past — and to some degree, it still might be thought of that way. But it has changed in the last few years. Today, he says, contractors pay more attention to the news when they report a jobsite accident and to their surroundings, looking for ways to make them safer. DeKalb is constantly learning of new dangers that its workers are exposed to and when they come to light, new training and PPE (personal protective equipment) is brought into the equation.

“Utility construction is such a high exposure profession,” notes King. “There are so many more things that we are aware of now that affects employees on a jobsite. In the industry and in our company, there is always work that needs to be done on the safety front. It’s hard to stay one step ahead of danger, because it’s where you least expect it. You need to make an effort to keep your employees focused on safety and keep them trained.”

### 50,001-100,000 Hours

#### **Raymow Construction Co. Inc.** *Oldsmar, Fla.*

As a medium-sized, family-owned site and utility construction company, Raymow Construction Co. Inc. concentrates its operations in the Tampa Bay, Fla., area. Since the company was started more than 14 years ago, its objective has been to provide the best quality finished product within the agreed schedule completion time — at a fair but profitable price to its customers. Raymow Construction has not had one lost-time injury.

According to company founder and president E. J. “Bud” Bradley, Raymow’s safety record can be attributed to a number of factors. One is a written, actively implemented safety program that is supported at all levels of the company — from the laborers up to the company owners. In addition, there are biweekly supervisor safety meetings to review fundamental safety practices and rules, no compromises on the basics, such as hard hat, safety glasses, long pants, shirt sleeves and hard shoes. Outstanding safety performance is rewarded in every way possible, as is keeping equipment and tools in good, safe operating condition.

Raymow’s ongoing safety program includes first aid/CPR training for all management (with biweekly review); utilization of NUCAs’ “Pocket Safety Guide,” bimonthly “Safety News,” weekly e-newsletter for toolbox talks and biweekly safety meetings and an annual safety luncheon with individual awards. Raymow screens employment candidates for competency and does not



Raymow’s founder and president Bud Bradley says the company has been safety-oriented from the top down since its first day of business — proving that even with safety as a first priority, you can be profitable in this industry.

allow an individual to perform any task for which he or she is not qualified. Its management provides on-the-job training routinely and communicates and enforces the belief that an attitude of a safe workplace is essential — no matter what the job.

“This company has been safety-oriented from the top down since our first day of business, so it has never been perceived as an inconvenience for those who’ve embraced the safety attitude on the job,” says Bradley. “Essentially, we implemented the fundamentals on day-one and made habits out of them. I think we have proven time and time again that, even with safety as our first priority, a company can be profitable in this industry.”

### 0-50,000 Hours

#### **A.E. Bragger Construction Co. Inc.** *Warwick, R.I.*

A.E. Bragger Construction Co.’s commitment to safety goes beyond the normal regulatory requirements. The company’s ongoing commitment to keep all of its employees and management up to date on current and new safety regulations has had the most significant impact on its impressive safety record.

Every day before work, the company engages in a “toolbox talk” of relevant subject matter of the day’s prospective work. Once on the job, the foreman and superintendent continually monitor the progress while reviewing safety precautions, so as to ensure a safe worksite. The company’s staff is very cognizant of its safety record, which instills in them a positive work ethic and comfort level that they can go home every night to their families. At the end of the year, the company awards bonuses based on injuries and accidents.

“Our employees are now more cognizant of the jobsite surroundings and the work environment — not only for themselves, but their fellow workers as well; we truly now work as a team,” says Virginia DiCristofaro, safety director for A.E. Bragger Construction. “Like anything new, it’s challenging for everyone to get used to new elements of the safety program. Fortunately, we have a great and supportive staff. That alone makes any changes in new safety measures much easier to employ.”

DiCristofaro explains that Rhode Island’s mandatory OSHA 10 Construction Safety Training requirement, in addition to a push by OSHA to increase inspections, has allowed the company to blend those safety measures into its own program. Over the last few years, the company has continued to engage in more “toolbox talks” and safety training programs in an effort to continue to improve every year.

“It’s an ongoing process. We believe that our accident and incident reductions were a direct result of our increased efforts as well as increasing our productivity and quality of work,” notes DiCristofaro. “And as a smaller company, it was a little easier to introduce these programs to our employees, but we still tried to improve communication to



A.E. Bragger Construction never stops working to increase safety awareness. Safety director Virginia DiCristofaro says just one accident is too much.

make it even easier. I don’t think you can ever stop working on increasing safety awareness. Just one accident is too much.”

Nick Zubko is associate editor of *Utility Contractor*.



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