

Another Side of Terry Dillon

The 2008 NUCA President Reflects on the Past and Looks Toward the Future

By Jason Morgan

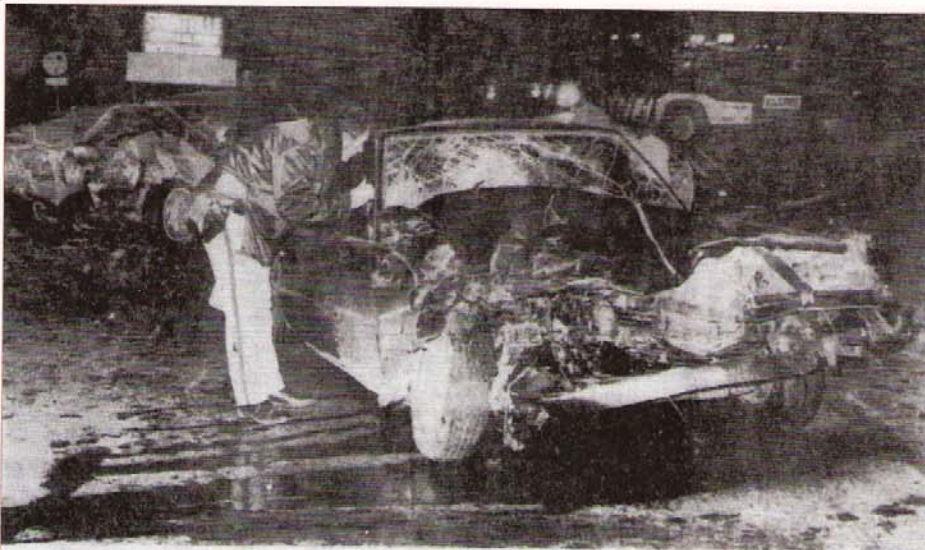
The blink of an eye takes between 300 and 400 milliseconds. It was in those fractions of a moment that Terry Dillon's life changed as another car darted into rival traffic and slammed head-on into Terry and his wife, Tina in their car. The police chased the drunk driver through two counties before Terry inadvertently ended the car chase; it was estimated that the drunk driver was running over 120 mph. Terry was driving 70 mph.

The fact that no one was killed didn't quell the pain of the severe injuries. Tina was in dire straights after having to be cut out of the car and Terry's back was in rough shape. Yet, the tragedy knocked Terry's career onto a new trajectory that would

lead him to owning a successful utility construction business in Atlas Excavation Inc. and his 2008 National Utility Contractor Association (NUCA) presidency.

"I believe life takes you down a path. Our job is to follow the path and do the best with it we can," says Terry. "I never set my goals to be President of NUCA. It just happened. I believe in the association and its work. I understand its potential power and how it can benefit my company and my life. We owe it to our industry to be involved and create a better existence for those who follow us. Someone did it for me and now it is my turn to do it for others."

While fate might play a role in Terry's presidency, he's proactive in reducing the amount of risks contractors have to take



THREE VEHICLES INVOLVED IN PILEUP DURING HIGH SPEED CHASE
 ... five people injured near Alexandria on Ind. 28 Saturday

Greg White

The newspaper clipping details the Dillons' horrific accident. But from the tragedy, Atlas Excavating Inc. was born and Terry was on a new path toward NUCA presidency.

and increasing NUCA's visibility to ensure it gets the respect it deserves. Membership involvement is also an important part of Terry's campaign goals. With more members, more work gets done and NUCA's voice becomes louder.

"Members sometimes think, others will do the work, so why should I do it?" Terry says. "If you think that way, are you sure we will do it the way you want it done? Don't complain if you are not involved. We want everyone's voice. Many of the items NUCA needs to be involved in resemble war-like atmospheres. I prefer to fight with an army — a big one."

Before championing NUCA on the steps of Congress, Terry reflected back on his success with Atlas Excavation — taking what he's learned in growing a small dirt-digging company with a single loader backhoe into a 150-employee utility and high-way reconstruction operation and applying that to his tenure as NUCA President.

Prior to that fateful car accident, Terry Dillon bought a block and brick laying company from his father in 1976, after working for him since the age of 12. When Terry took over, his father remained in the footing business and the two would work together on jobs, with Terry as his father's sub-contractor but as two separate companies.

After the car accident in December 1978, he was unable to continue masonry work due to the sustained back injury. So, he sold the company to his brother-in-law, bought a 580 Case backhoe loader and began digging water and sewer lines for residential homes.

"Due to my relationship with builders, I quickly got work installing sewer and water lines to homes. Unfortunately, as 1980 came, the residential market was failing and interest rates were up to 21 percent," Terry recalls. "I then started doing work for general contractors, site work and then I found out they had these things called Dodge Reports with all kinds of work on them to bid. I started bidding pipe jobs and drainage jobs."

day. For this, I apologize to my family as it was not really fair to them, but I knew no other way.

"The hours and effort it took was big for both of us, it really hit home one night when I did get a break and came home early after serious urging from Tina. My youngest son

After a year, the company needed a dump truck driver. Tina stepped up to the challenge — first driving a tandem axle truck and quickly moving up to a tri-axle truck. Usually, Tina had one or both of their kids with her while transporting the company's spoils.

By day, Terry would hit the trenches, but by night he was a mechanic — fixing dump trucks — and teaching himself how to bid work.

"It was scary when I think about it," Terry confesses. "For about four years, I spent an enormous amount of time learning the business and working late hours every



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Today, Atlas Excavating Inc. performs sewer and storm sewer work, with water work on the side — specializing in deep 30- to 50-ft, wet or rock trenching. Occasionally, Atlas picks up some highway road reconstruction work, as long as there is a large amount of pipe work.

Nick, who was around 4 or 5 years-old at the time, was very upset with me, and all night he said he wanted a new dad. I was never home and he wanted someone to be his dad. Twenty-four years later, that still stings.”

Despite the trials and tribulations, the dedication paid off when Terry and Tina founded Atlas Excavation Inc. in 1981. During the first four years of Atlas’ operation, Terry would take on site work projects and lose money. Then he would find a pipe installation job and make back the money and then some. Eventually, a pattern emerged and Terry took on more pipe laying and less site work.

While the company gave bridge building and concrete paving a whirl from 1996 to 2000, it found that its bread and butter remained in pipe work. Today, Atlas performs sewer and storm sewer work, with water work on the side — specializing in deep 30 to 50 ft deep, wet or rock trenching. Occasionally, Atlas picks up some highway road reconstruction work, as long as there is a large amount of pipe work.

The company’s growth is due to a system of checks and balances. “I always joke that the greatest system I ever put into place was alphabetizing the filing system. While that seems simple, when you start your own company you know nothing about filing, bidding, cost accounting, billing, correspondence, contracts, specifications and schedules.”

Out of that simplicity grew a sophisticated estimating system, bidding program, field construction accounting system, job

tracking and more. And everything has a cross check — tracking job profits on a day-to-day basis. Atlas foremen and superintendents have filed computers and enter the daily data to track profits, from labor and equipment to materials and sub-contractors.

As the sun beat down on the 1991 NUCA EXPO show in Phoenix, Terry, a young and struggling contractor, was just looking for his next paycheck to put food on the table. But what he found was a living, breathing industry, and NUCA was at the forefront of putting an emphasis on contracting as a way of life and not just a job. Since the introduction to NUCA, Terry and Atlas Construction have been involved with the association since the early 1990s.

In the early days of his relationship with NUCA, Terry asked fellow contractor Mark Harris, then based in Florida, why he saw so much in NUCA. He responded by asking Terry if he could run Atlas on the spot. When Terry responded with an excited, “no,” Harris asked Terry why he would allow him to be his voice in the industry.

“If you’re involved, you have your own voice,” says Terry. “I do not mean just going to meetings. You must go to the meetings, get informed and go back home and see your congressman with your opinion. E-mails and letters work just the same. Being involved means doing actual work on a committee. It does not take a lot of time, but it does take effort.”

The early lesson put member involvement on Terry's agenda for 2008. While he stresses big-picture thinking, Terry knows that large changes start on a small scale. By getting more members involved, there are more people pushing to fix a problem or create a pro-active solution.

"The personal growth you get from seeing the big picture is a benefit that is hard to describe," Terry explains. "NUCA has a way of helping you grow up, become a business person, a professional and to respect those around you. You learn about consensus, you learn how important other opinions are and you get to be on the inside of Washington decisions and understand why Washington thinks the way they do. You get to voice your opinion in an educated way to lawmakers affecting our industry."

Local chapters are the heart and soul of NUCA in Terry's book. They unite members and prepare them for operating on a national level by training them on the state level. And Terry hopes to extend this by educating local chapters on their importance at the federal level.

"I have been amazed at how much the NUCA chapters do in each of their states," says Terry. "While I admire and greatly respect the Chapter Executive Directors of each state, the strength their membership brings is tremendous. It takes involvement and effort to accomplish federal goals too. We need a lot more membership involvement and help. Hopefully I can help with that message."

Before his presidency, Terry sat on the board of directors on the local level when NUCA had a charter with Indiana Constructors Inc. (ICI). Rarely happy with the support NUCA received, Terry contacted fellow contractors Chuck Norman of Eagle Valley and Jeff Reynolds of Reynolds and formed NUCA of Indiana in 2004.

At the national level, he served on the Board of Directors and then on the Executive Board for about eight years. Terry quickly moved through the ranks starting as the Secretary of the Administrative board and working his way through Treasurer, Vice President, President-Elect and, now, President. He also chaired the education, membership and chapter relations and awards committees. Additionally, Terry was awarded the 2005 Ditchdigger of the Year award.

In understanding the importance of NUCA, Terry knows how to get the most out of what the association offers. NUCA affords the opportunity to interact with peers, learn from their experiences, share ideas, problems and bond with people who work in the industry.

"I have made a great deal of friends at NUCA — something I would never have been able to do at home," says Terry. "I have gained so much business information that we use today without trial and error it is not measurable. NUCA is the only place you can go and get instant respect for what you do. We all dig ditches for a living and only we understand how professional a business it is. We are a proud bunch and it shows at NUCA."

While being involved and active with all the legislation, Terry has a particular interest in the Clean Water Act and death tax. "I believe we owe it to our children and our grandchildren to take responsibility for infrastructure deterioration, upgrading and a working system that gives us clean water to drink. I see this environment every day, and most others do not. It is something buried, out of sight out of mind, until the water faucet does not work, and that day is coming faster than the general public realizes," Terry explains. "Closing a business to get death tax is not very smart; keeping the tax paying business open and fluid will

allow continued tax flow to the government more than any death tax can produce. The death tax is once; the company surviving from generation to generation is a life time of tax income."

But he knows that his strength lies in numbers — with the voices of a unified NUCA.

"The greatest asset of NUCA is the members themselves," Terry concludes. "I believe NUCA and its members have shaped me into a better person and better company owner. I will always be grateful and respectful for that."



The free-wheelin' Terry Dillon rocks out with his band Running with Zcyzzors, when he's not on a jobsite, on official NUCA business or relaxing at home.

Jason Morgan is associate editor of *Utility Contractor*.