

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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Human Faces

You Can Truss(t) Us by Libby Maurer with Bob Becht

If you ask anyone in the community, they'll tell you I'm always up for inviting people in for plant tours," remarked Bob Becht, President of Chambers Truss in Fort Pierce, FL. So when Mike Gablemann, twenty-year St. Lucie County fire fighter and 19-year instructor for the Indian River Community College Fire Science Program, called to ask if he could bring in his class, Becht was more than willing. "I gave a plant tour to fire science instructor Gablemann and 18 firefighter students. Gablemann took me aside and warned that I should be prepared for questions about trusses killing fire fighters."

It was at that point that Becht realized Gablemann and his students were very skeptical of the design and the manufacture of trusses. "They harbor a lot of the common mythology surrounding the dangers of the wood truss in construction applications. They even quoted a phrase from a training manual, 'never trust a truss.'"

Becht said he saw their skepticism as an opportunity to change their minds by educating them.

According to Becht, one of the things they were very curious about was why the connector plates pop off the members when exposed to the heat of a fire. "I was able to correct this contradictory viewpoint by explaining that when the wood members are exposed to the intense heat of a fire, the structural integrity of the trusses is going to be compromised. The heat is not causing the plates to pop off."

Becht took the group through the entire operation, from the design department to the truss plant, explaining the function and role of each job in the process. "The students' reaction was, 'we had no idea how involved it is to produce a truss!'"

After the tour, Becht took the class to his training center, a facility that is detached from the plant, where he demonstrated correct handling, installing and bracing methods with bracing models and WTCA's bracing video.

"Mike took me aside and said, 'it really impressed me to hear you say you aren't in the business to create a product that hurts firefighters.'"

When Becht told him he was a member of WTCA, Gablemann expressed his gratitude for WTCA's commitment to firefighter safety. "He said for 20 years he has been hearing that trusses killed firefighters, but today changed his mind. He invited me to speak at the college and wants to bring more firefighters to tour Chambers Truss."

Then Becht remembered the [Carbeck Structural Components Institute](#)/Houston Fire Department program, The Fire Performance of Wood Trusses, and gave Gablemann a copy. Becht stated, "The knowledge I've gained from WTCA board meetings in the last few years and through viewing the CSCI program gave me the ammunition to win him over."

"If this scenario had happened three years ago, I wouldn't have had anywhere near the resources and background to be able to defend our industry against this unsubstantiated myth. I changed the minds of 19 people that day. And I realized that's enough reinforcement for me to continue inviting the fire community into my operation and staying deeply involved with our industry organization and its chapters. One changed mind is worth it: I got 18 more. This is incredibly valuable for our industry!"

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