

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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WTCA-Arizona Burns Old Perceptions by Molly E. Butz

Keith Azlin has worked with the Tucson Fire Department to provide education and facts about the performance of wood trusses.

In the June 2004 issue, FireRescue Magazine published an article entitled “Truss Truce.” The first sentence of the article states, “Trusses are strong, efficient, reliable, predictable, and, once you get to know them, pretty cool.” You’re probably already thinking, “Sure, some industrial engineer wrote another article about the wonderful uses for structural building components and how critical it is that the fire service understands this type of construction and embraces it.” The further you read, the more you’re convinced...unless you happened to skip to the end first to read about the author, Mark Emery, because that’s where it gets interesting. There you would discover that not only is Emery a fourth-generation career firefighter and currently assigned as an Operations Battalion Chief, he is also a graduate of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program and a National Fire Academy Instructor Specialist, and is not, as previously suspected, an industrial engineer.

The article goes on to describe the “Anatomy of a Truss” and even delves into “How a Truss Works.” It is obvious Emery has done his homework. By this point you’re probably thinking, “Great, this is just what we need! It’s good to know there are fire service personnel that accept and support wood truss construction.” Make no mistake, this is true; unfortunately, not every firefighter feels this way. Much of the training firefighters receive still teaches negative—and largely false—information about building components which creates a bit of a gap between the fire service and our industry.

Enter Keith Azlin, WTCA-Arizona Chapter (WTCA-AZ) member.

WTCA-AZ invited several fire service personnel to the 2003 Building Component Manufacturers (BCMC) show in Phoenix, AZ. This opened the door to relationships with key individuals in the fire service while giving them the opportunity to learn facts about the structural building components industry. Azlin was already keenly aware of how the fire service felt about our industry and had recently finished giving a presentation using the Carbeck Structural Components Institute’s (CSCI) Fire Education Program, The Fire Performance of Wood Trusses, at a meeting with the Phoenix Fire Department in August 2003. In Azlin’s home town of Tucson, many of the same cynical feelings about building components prevailed. Fortunately, one of the people WTCA-AZ invited to BCMC 2003 was Captain Tom McNamara of the Tucson Fire Department (TFD). Azlin took that opportunity to begin discussing the issues surrounding truss construction on the fire ground and that’s all it took to get the ball rolling.

By July 2004, Azlin had given three separate train-the-trainer presentations using The Fire Performance of Wood Trusses CD to 15 TFD captains. As usual, the information the captains were

receiving was very different from what they had learned in the past. “[The presentations] were very well received,” Azlin said. “They really all just took it in, and I kept hearing comments like, ‘Wow, this is great!’ They were impressed with what they heard; it was another angle and more information. At the end, they were still hungry for more.” The presentations went so well that the captains Azlin trained have begun to implement the CSCI Fire Education Program into their instruction and will continue to educate other fire captains as well as captains-in-training.

Azlin explained that it wasn’t until the mid-1980s that truss construction really became popular in the Tucson area. Up to that point, most houses were 2x8 rafter construction with no trusses in use. “Probably 85 percent of the residential construction [in the Tucson area] uses trusses now. Close to 100 percent of subdivision work is trusses and roughly 50 percent of custom homes are trusses, too,” Azlin clarified. “With a lot of Santa Fe style homes, there are a lot of flat roofs without attic space and it’s a different kind of construction. The most important thing is for the firefighters to understand the various building types and the engineering behind them.”

To drive his point home, Azlin invited each of the three groups of captains to tour his component manufacturing plant, U.S. Components, LLC, of Tucson. “It was very educational for the guys,” Azlin said. “They couldn’t believe all of the pieces that go into making a roof truss. And some of them were really impressed with all of the things that can be done with trusses.” The plant tours provided the firefighters with real world access to back up all of the things they had been learning in the training.

“Absolutely it was a valuable experience,” Azlin told SBC staff, “Would I do it again? Sure, as soon as they want me to!” When asked what advice he might give to other WTCA members hoping to give the same kinds of seminars, Azlin was direct: “Just make sure you’ve watched the CD and that you’re knowledgeable about the information. Remember, you’re a truss manufacturer, not a firefighter. You can’t come to them trying to teach them how to fight a fire. Introduce them to the truss industry and give them a basic understanding of our product, tell them about what you know, which is trusses, and not about fighting fires. The trusses are going to burn, but with the Carbeck CD, you can reassure them that they will be able to develop a plan to fight a fire in a structure containing wood trusses and maintain their safety.”

Emery agreed. The last paragraph of “Truss Truce” spells it out, plainly and simply: “The informed strategist acknowledges that when a truss failure kills a firefighter, it’s not because the truss is evil. It’s not because the fire is evil. It’s not because gravity is evil. It’s because a fire officer allowed the firefighter to be there when the truss failed.” Providing firefighters with truthful information they can use for pre-fire planning and decision-making on the scene of a fire can mean preventing injury or illness, or even saving lives. Thanks to members like Azlin and WTCA-AZ, we may be reading more articles like “Truss Truce” in the very near future.

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The mission of Structural Building Components Magazine (SBC) is to increase the knowledge of and to promote the common interests of those engaged in manufacturing and distributing of structural building components to ensure growth and continuity, and to be the information conduit by staying abreast of leading-edge issues. SBC will take a leadership role on behalf of the component industry in disseminating technical and marketplace information, and will maintain advisory committees consisting of the most knowledgeable professionals in the industry. The opinions expressed in SBC are those of the authors and those quoted solely, and are not necessarily the opinions of any of the affiliated associations (SBCC, WTCA, SCDA & STCA).