

# CALIFORNIA ASPHALT MAGAZINE

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2012 Quality Issue

**Bruce W. Woolpert**  
*1951-2012*  
**Champion  
of Quality**



# *Bruce W. Woolpert*

Editor's Note: Since this issue of California Asphalt Magazine is dedicated to quality, it seemed fitting to pay tribute to one of the longtime champions of quality for our industry, Graniterock CEO Bruce W. Woolpert, who died tragically last June. CalAPA Executive Director Russell W. Snyder gives us his personal account of one of the giants of our industry.



On August 19 of last year I had plenty of time to think as I made the three-hour drive from my West Sacramento office to the headquarters of Graniterock in Watsonville. I was on my way to meet with Bruce W. Woolpert, the company's longtime chief executive officer, and a person I had admired for many years.

The details of that meeting are still fresh in my mind, as well as in the copious notes I took that day. Those thoughts came flooding back to me recently as I learned of the untimely passing of Bruce last June 24 in a boating accident on Lake Tahoe.

If you didn't know Bruce, or just knew of him, he probably would have preferred it that way. He was as quiet and unassuming as they come, but his contributions loom large not only for our industry but for American business in general. Bruce made you better, whether you realize it or not. His story is worth knowing and drawing lessons from.

My meeting with Bruce last year was at my request. As executive director for the California Asphalt Pavement Association, one of the most important aspects of my job is listening. Valuable information is everywhere, but you must be committed to seek it out and understand what it means for your job, your industry and, in some cases, your personal life.

Listening to members, particularly company principals, is vital. This goes far beyond the perfunctory "How are we doing?" When I talk to members I want to know, What's on their mind? What are they worrying about? What do they think about the present state of their business? The industry? What does the future look like? Where are the threats? In the military they call this "situational awareness." Battlefield commanders need to know what's happening around them, and anticipate future conditions, so they can make the best decisions. Lives depend on it. My many mentors over the years drilled this

into my head. In my recent career path as an association executive this discipline is an important component of my value to my members: I gather information, distill it down to its essential and most valuable elements, and then push it back out to all members so they can also be aware of the environment and make well-informed decisions. Thankfully, my first career as a newspaper reporter and editor make this a skill that comes naturally.

As I drove my Chrysler down I-5 to Watsonville last year my mind was full of thoughts like this. I had met Bruce previously but couldn't say that we knew each other well. But I certainly knew him by reputation and, as I later found out, he knew me by reputation as well.

Bruce Wilson Woolpert was born on May 30, 1951 in Watsonville. His parents were Gideon Woolpert and Mary Elizabeth Woolpert. According to his official biography, he attended MacQuiddy elementary School, E.A. Hall Junior High School and graduated from Watsonville High School in 1970. He was the ultimate "local boy makes good" story, which is why he now has an honored place in the Watsonville High School Hall of Fame.

Bruce studied for his undergraduate degree in economics at the University



***Bruce Woolpert shortly after he returned to Graniterock.***



**Bruce Woolpert, right, meets with U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, left and others at a ribbon-cutting for an airport job on Airport Blvd. at U.S. 101 in Salinas.**

of California at Los Angeles, graduating summa cum laude in 1974. He went on to Stanford University where he received a Master's Degree in Business Administration in 1976, graduating first in his class.

In 1976 he began a 10-year career with Hewlett Packard in San Diego as a Product Marketing Manager, where he was instrumental in creating HP's graphics business. In the early 1980s he moved to HP's Cupertino campus as marketing manager and played a key role in establishing HP in the personal computer business. Along the way he developed an eye for recruiting and developing talent. One of his H-P hires was Jim Collins, who went on to fame as author of several successful business books, including "Built to Last" and "Good to Great." Bruce was a rising star in a respected technology company at the dawn of the Information Age. For anyone else that would be a successful career, but not Bruce. That's because his Watsonville roots and the family business beckoned.

**"Bruce's grandfather, Arthur R. Wilson, founded the Granite Rock Company in 1900..."**

Bruce's grandfather, Arthur R. Wilson, founded the Granite Rock Company in 1900, supplying construction materials to the growing San Francisco Bay Area. Throughout his childhood and summer vacations, Bruce worked at various Graniterock locations. On Feb. 1, 1986, he returned to the company as co-president, along with his brother, Steve. In 1997 the Graniterock Board of Directors elected Bruce to the position of president and chief executive officer.

Bruce's tenure at the helm of Graniterock was stated thusly in his biography: "Bruce was a gifted leader and set a fresh and enduring vision for the company founded on core values that he held dear, including safety, dedication to customer service excellence, the growth and development of Graniterock people, honesty and integrity, and continuous improvement and lifelong learning."

Please take a moment to re-read that last paragraph. It's easy to dismiss it as so much P.R.

puffery except that Bruce was all that and more. He lived it every waking hour. These days it's fashionable for business leaders to talk about core values even as the headlines are filled with examples of corporate greed, excess and corruption. Everyone knows that true leaders need to "walk the walk." That's why mission statements, strategic plans, annual reports and other such communication vehicles are meaningless unless the organization embraces them from top to bottom. Bruce always made sure his actions matched his words. He put his employees and his customers first. He empowered them. He celebrated their accomplishments. He was all about team goals. Continuous improvement was imbedded in his company's DNA. Everyone knew it and everyone was on board. That's walking the walk, and precisely the kind of leadership Jim Collins highlights in his best-selling business books.

Later in Bruce's biography, more genuine insight: "Bruce had a strong belief that a person's life's work was a noble calling, which he embraced by his dedication to the work of the company and the growth of the Graniterock team. He was a most principled person, and always emphasized the need to 'tell the truth – even when it is not popular.' Bruce's sense of humor, creativity and fundamental belief in people were treasured by all who knew him."

As I steered my sedan up the hill leading to Graniterock's gleaming corporate offices on Technology Drive in Watsonville I began thinking about the first time Bruce came into my consciousness – as the leader of a company that won the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. For those who are familiar with this award, please bear with me.

For those who aren't, I have one simple question for you as it pertains to your business: "How do you know?" As in, "How do you know you have good customer service?" Or "How do you know you are on your way to meet your strategic goals?" Or "How do you know your operations are as efficient as they could be?" "How do you define and measure success?"



***Bruce Woolpert receives the prestigious Baldrige Award from President George Bush Sr.***

The power of these and other "how" questions are at the heart of Baldrige, named after the former businessman and Commerce Secretary. To call it an award is really to do a disservice to the fine companies that have won – a veritable Hall of Fame of our country's most celebrated organizations at the zenith of their success, including household names such as Boeing, 3M, Texas Instruments, Xerox, Ritz-Carlton, Federal Express, Motorola, as well as other lesser-known but no less successful companies and organizations.

Baldrige is not so much an award but rather a powerful business self-assessment tool. I should know – I was once a senior examiner for the California version of the Baldrige. The application weighs in at 50 pages. Companies are asked to demonstrate – prove with objective, verifiable information -- that they are well-run, world-class organizations with systems in place to ensure that they continuously improve. After companies submit applications they must undergo a review by examiners (judges) who rank them on seven criteria proven

as indicators of performance excellence. Only the most outstanding companies merit a site visit, where examiners tour company facilities, grill company executives, audit documentation, interview employees and conduct other independent information-gathering and analysis that verifies (or discounts) what is stated in the application. To use a sports metaphor, the Baldrige is less like a race where the first person across the finish line is declared the winner, but more like a world record. If you don't hit the mark, you don't get an award. Companies that do have proven systems in place to ensure they are successful year after year, or "Built to Last."

Over the years companies learned that during the process of filling out the application, and gathering the information required (and asking themselves the application questions,) they identify gaps in their deployment and opportunities for improvement. Some companies even use the feedback report on the application as an improvement punch list. If you can survive the rigor of the examination process, merit a site

visit, and are determined to be a truly outstanding company or organization, you are presented with the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Winning the Baldrige is a very big deal. That's why it is the only business award presented by the president of the United States. Graniterock won in 1992, and the award was presented to the company by President George H.W. Bush. I had read their application as part of my examiner training, and it was truly impressive. As I entered the company lobby in Watsonville,

the obelisk with the Baldrige medallion stands proudly in a display case just inside the door, a quiet sentinel standing guard at the gateway to performance excellence. I fumbled for my camera phone and snapped a picture of it. I was in the presence of greatness.

By the time I was led to a conference room to meet with Bruce, I kind of felt like I was preparing for an audience with the Dali Lama. Bruce immediately put me at ease with his soft-spoken, bookish manner. It was more like meeting with a favorite college professor than a construction industry CEO, and we had a great conversation on a host of subjects that made 90 minutes evaporate. Although I was there to learn from one of our industry leaders, Bruce very much wanted to learn from me as well. At first I was caught off guard as he quizzed me on a number of subjects. But I eventually realized this was part of Bruce's life philosophy: Be a life-long learner, and pick up insight from anyone encountered along the way. He was aware of my work on behalf of the industry, and knew that

my job afforded me a different perspective on strategic issues than a company principal.

Going back through my notes, scrawled on a yellow legal pad, I am reminded of a few of the choice “take-aways” from our meeting. On the subject of contractor-owner relations, for example, he said “It’s hard to imagine anything outstanding happening (on a project) without an outstanding owner,” and went on to give his philosophy of working to develop a true partnership between owner and contractor/supplier that benefits all. Another nugget: When the performance of the owner goes up, “our performance goes up.” In other words, a rising tide lifts all boats. Working together to strive for a quality project and a satisfactory outcome benefits everyone involved in the project and raises the level of their game. Classic Bruce.

Later in the conversation another great take-away for me as an association executive: Every year Graniterock looks closely at all its expenses, including association memberships, to evaluate if they are worthwhile investments of the company’s money. In a down economy, this exercise takes on even greater urgency. Our association membership was not immune from this scrutiny. We have survived this review, Bruce told me, because the consensus was that we were providing value to his company. “We may not always attend every meeting,” Bruce said at one point, “But we read everything you send us and share it internally.” That last quote may not be word-for-word because I had stopped taking notes at that point, but the thought

“In 1997 the Graniterock Board of Directors elected Bruce to the position of president and chief executive officer.”

stayed with me to this day. To be relevant, our association must deliver valuable information to our members that they can’t get anywhere else, and the information must be accurate, insightful, and help them be more successful companies. Thanks, Bruce, for another great bit of insight.

The drive back up Interstate 5 to West Sacramento afforded me plenty of time to mull over the things Bruce and I talked about, and to think about the factors that contribute to the success of a company. Putting my Baldrige hat on, I thought about how examiners interview company or organizational leaders and match what they say to what they find elsewhere in the organization. Do all employees know the mission and buy into it? Are there robust systems in place, that are measurable, to ensure that the organization is always striving to improve? Is the culture of the organization in alignment with the top-level vision? As part of winning the Baldrige, winners bear the responsibility of helping mentor other organizations and sharing best practices, so I had an opportunity to study Graniterock’s winning application. I thought about all the people I had met who work for Graniterock over the years, and even former Graniterock employees who have gone on to success at other companies.

Without exception, they always impress me with their professionalism, expertise and commitment to a quality job and continuous improvement. That is proof-positive of an effective system to develop an outstanding workforce.

Fast-forward to June of this year. Like many in industry I was saddened to learn that Bruce died in a tragic boating accident June 24 in Lake Tahoe. A funeral

service took place a week later at the Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Saratoga. The service was overflowing with family, friends, co-workers and others who were touched by Bruce over the years. The crowd was so large it necessitated traffic control on Saratoga Avenue. I had a mix of emotions as I walked up to the front of the church and saw many colleagues who felt as I did – that they owed a debt of gratitude to Bruce and, although heavy-hearted, nonetheless wanted to celebrate his legacy. I saw too many people to name here, but Mike Cook and Hongbin Xie of Graniterock, who I have dealt with on numerous technical matters, were among the first people I saw at the church entrance. It was also poignant to see Graniterock alumni who took the skills they learned at the company to be successful at elsewhere, including John Franich, now head of Granite Construction’s California division, and Tom Carter, who now works for Twining Labs. The church was filled with people from all walks of life who were touched by Bruce, from industry titans, elected officials, friends and acquaintances and, of course, Graniterock employees. I sat next to a former state constitutional officer, ex-California Secretary of State Bruce MacPherson. At one point during the eulogy, someone said they were one of Bruce’s best friends, and that Bruce had 1,000 best friends. That elicited a knowing laugh from the gathering. Later someone said “Let’s not cry because it’s over, let’s smile because he touched us.” In a service rich with symbolism, perhaps the most powerful symbol was a bookmark that was handed to every attendee. Bruce was a voracious reader and took a scholarly approach to his job and his life. It was perfect.

Afterward I bumped in to Larry Bonine, former Arizona Department of Transportation director, performance excellence zenmaster and a member of the Graniterock board of directors. I had gotten to know Larry when I was a manager at Caltrans in the 1990s, and we exchanged a few pleasantries. I told him about my meeting with Bruce last year and all the notes I took. He flashed a wide grin and shared the story of the first time he met Bruce: Larry was invited to participate in a panel discussion in California of road construction leaders, and Bruce was also on the panel. When it came time for Bruce to speak, Larry told me, his initial reaction was that this soft-spoken man could not be a leader of a construction company. After a couple of minutes, however, Larry said he found himself hanging on every word Bruce was saying, as was the rest of the audience. Slowly, discretely, Larry pulled out a pen and some paper from his pocket and began taking notes. When Bruce spoke, generally there were words of wisdom that you wanted to write down and reflect on later. Bruce wasn't one to grab the spotlight, or the microphone, but when he spoke there were always pearls of wisdom to be harvested and put to good use. Not long after that first encounter, Larry became one of Bruce's 1,000 best friends.

During the service the gathering got to hear about Bruce's accomplishments in business, and there were many. The audience heard a few highlights of how he guided the growth of his company, added the Pavex division, and the multitude of business innovations

and process improvements implemented on his watch. Dedication to his employees was always at the forefront. And, of course, there were the many awards and recognitions, including the Baldrige.

But some of Bruce's most passionate contributions were back to his community.

Under Bruce's leadership, Graniterock supported numerous community needs, particularly in the area of education.

Bruce also made sure he devoted time to his family and friends. He nurtured and maintained rich friendships throughout his life, and he loved to attend his son, Arthur's many sporting events, and supported his daughter, Marianne's passion for business and equestrian sports.

In his obituary, it stated that "Bruce would always come home and make sure that everything was perfect. He would eat dinner and then make the rest of the family relax while he would finish the dishes. Bruce would make sure that everybody was squared away before he would do anything for himself."

For those who knew Bruce, and his philosophy of leader as servant, this passage in his obituary was very fitting. His core values were his life, and he lived them at work and at home, every day of his life.

Bruce is survived by his wife, Rose Ann, and his children, Marianne and Arthur, and his brother, Steve. He was preceded in death by his parents. If there was ever a company that was positioned to succeed after the departure of its leader, it's Graniterock, with its emphasis of employee development, mentoring and grooming the

next generation of leaders. The company recently announced that its vice president and general counsel, Tom Squeri, has taken the helm. Not to replace Bruce, as Tom would tell you, but to carry on and build on his legacy.

For those who would like to remember Bruce in a tangible way, you may contribute to the Woolpert Family Foundation to continue Bruce's legacy in educational programs. The address is P.O. Box 50001, Watsonville, CA 95077.

At his funeral someone remarked that Bruce would no doubt squirm at the various tributes and accolades being heaped upon him, but it's a story that deserves to be told and cherished. And just like Bruce's life philosophy, there are lessons to be learned, and applied, if you look for them.

**Epilogue:** While I was writing this piece, I reached out to Jim Collins, the famed business author who was a lifelong friend and colleague of Bruce's. His note back to me summed up Bruce's life about as eloquently as any I have heard:

"Bruce contributed so much, to so many. I had the great privilege to watch him influence young leaders through the Graniterock case, and to be tremendously influenced by his example -- and his caring -- in my own life. With all the demands on his time, and all his accomplishments, he always somehow found energy to invest himself in helping others grow. Bruce changed the trajectory and deepened the character of so many people -- I am but one of thousands -- that his true impact is far beyond what anyone can easily see. If there could be a personal life Baldrige Award for one's quality as a person and for a life well led, Bruce would top the list." -Jim Collins CAM

"Dedication to his employees was always at the forefront. But some of Bruce's most passionate contributions were back to his community."