



*A Six-Decade
Friendship Built
On a Handshake*

by Doug Eberhardt

Lehigh Construction Group, Inc. and Pinto Construction Services have collaborated on projects for almost 40 years, but the relationship began long before then.

Earl Knauss and George Panepinto met in 1956 while Earl was working for International Chimney Corporation and George worked at Pinto Trucking Services.

Earl, 91, and George, 82, have remained friends for more than 65 years and recently got together to reminisce on some of their favorite jobs, to talk about customers and challenges they faced and to share some of the values that helped inspire their sons to run their own successful construction companies.

In 1960, the owner of International Chimney Corporation retired, a new ICC was formed and three new offshoot businesses were spawned: Porter-Knauss Construction, Taylor International and Furnco. Earl Knauss and his boss at ICC, Woody Porter, started Porter Knauss and began serving former ICC clients on their first day in business. Earl and Woody never missed a paycheck!

George Panepinto was only 16-years-old when he began to work at Pinto Trucking Services for his Uncle Charles “Charlie Pinto” Panepinto. George didn’t quite have his driver’s license yet, just a learner’s permit. George was the tire repairman for Charlie’s fleet of trucks. In the event of an emergency road call, Charlie would provide his cherished “Erie County courtesy card” to George in case he needed to leave the premises for a road call and was pulled over. In 1972, Charlie retired, and George started Pinto Equipment Rental. During this time, George also began raising his family, including son Jim and his six siblings who became important contributors to the Pinto business effort.

From their initial meeting, the Earl and George business relationship was “built on a handshake,” and their shared values and work ethic would grow two prosperous companies and eventually inspire the next generation of leadership.

As the men met to review their families, lives and careers, their mutual respect

was overwhelming. They smiled like schoolboys reminiscing about the many successful projects completed together. Both men’s memories were sharp and the amount of detail they shared was incredible. Earl shared photos of one of their jobs and was quick to point out that they might be the only job photos ever taken as getting the work done always took precedence over “marketing.” George agreed.

Earl was highly appreciative of George, and his team and the two were able to recall many specific large foundation jobs both companies worked on over the years at the American Brass, DuPont, Bethlehem Steel and General Motors plants.

While Porter Knauss was the general contractor, Pinto Equipment Rental specialized in excavation and eventually evolved into demolition. George worked with Earl as a subcontractor with each of the men

proud of the fact that they had completed all their deals with only a handshake — which worked well for both parties during their entire business relationship. While the scope of their jobs was being estimated and worked out, each man stood by their obligations and commitments — another value that would find the way into their son’s companies. Both men stressed the importance of being fair to the other as an integral part of their mutual success.

George was proud of the fact that Pinto’s reputation enabled his company to attract good help stating that “most of the success was based of the loyalty and quality of the people” they attracted. Earl agreed saying “same kind of companies, same kind of people.”

Citing an example of the loyalty of his people, George talked about his 85-year-old cherished secretary “Rose,” who



worked closely with him for more than 50 years. Earl remembered her fondly as well. It seems as George returned to the office one day, he spotted Rose in his private office with her feet up on his desk. She was unaware of his presence and was praying the rosary. He overheard her say, “Dear God, please bless George who is on a dangerous wrecking job today.” George, overcome and humbled, quietly put his paperwork on her desk and left for the shop.

While George worked with other general contractors and treated everyone fairly, Porter Knauss was a trusted partner, and he spoke of advantages that might materialize during the job that could be shared to facilitate working together to ensure the best outcome for the customer while benefiting both parties and encouraging collaboration and long-term relationships.

Another favorite anecdote the men shared was when the city of Buffalo instituted the requirement that general contractors secure a license to work in the city. Earl went down to the License Bureau to present his qualifications to the Contractors Review Board. Who was sitting there chairing the hearing ... George Panepinto. George laughingly added, “Can you imagine that, I started out working for Earl and had now been given the task of OKing his license.” George turned to the board and said, “He’s the best in my book. I move we approve without further delay.”

Both Earl and George are still humbled by their successes in business and in life. They both feel that surrounding themselves with good and ethical people was critical to long-term success, and both stressed loyalty and trust as most important in their own success. When Dave and Tom Glomb (who worked for Earl as a superintendent) started Lehigh in 1984, the lessons, work experience and values imparted by Earl helped guide the new business owners as they established their own customer relationships.

Pinto Construction Services, Inc.
President Jim Panepinto has also grown



his company using values learned from his father over many years. George recounted a recent conversation with his sister during which she said, “I never remember Dad and Mom preaching to us what to do. They never told us what to do, we just did what they did.” Those same values have been passed along from George to Jim and his siblings. Jim, now president of his company, oversees operations, while his dad, on any given day, can be found sitting on a piece of heavy equipment demonstrating to veteran and novice operators the techniques he has honed over the years.

The loyalty and trust passed down from Earl and George have also been an important part of the relationship between Dave and Jim. While they had grown up in the businesses together, each has carved out his own successful niche in the construction industry.

After a fire destroyed the former Tops warehouse on Dingens Street in Buffalo, Jim purchased the site with the intention of cleaning it up for redevelopment. Lehigh helped to market the property and made several attempts to relocate clients and prospects to the site. Eventually Jim opted to build a warehouse on spec and engaged Lehigh to manage the construction and to work closely with his crews. The successful delivery of the project allowed Jim to fully lease the 80,000-square-foot building, which will lead to the construction of a second warehouse on the site in 2023.

While both Earl and George enjoyed talking about the past, their eyes lit up when they talked about their futures, what they still have to offer and how their lives have meaning through service to others.

Earl is still hard at work overseeing a vegetable distribution operation that delivers unsold produce from Eden Farmers to pantries and soup kitchens all over WNY. He is active in his church and is a lifelong Rotarian. Earl and Dave have also supported Amy Betros and St. Luke’s Mission of Mercy for more than 25 years.

George feels service is a fundamental part of his makeup, not only in his business, but should be reflected in his service to society. He has been involved with the St. Jude Center on Ellicott and Carlton streets in Buffalo that provides pastoral care and support in the medical corridor’s hospitals, the Family Justice Center, Grand Island dealing with domestic violence and the Response to Love Center on the east side of Buffalo, feeding the hungry. George is extremely proud of his son Jim’s efforts with St. Joseph’s Collegiate Institute and his spear-heading of several campus development projects, along with facility improvements at the Kevin Guest house in the medical corridor that provides hospital support to out of town patients and families.

These two humble men who have given so much to their families and businesses are treasures to be cherished, and still have so much to give.