

# The constructive approach

**Engineer builds consensus and earns people's respect as he finds inventive ways to get the toughest jobs done**

BY PAM BERRY  
Free Press Special Writer

**W**hen Ralph Stephenson gave his first talk on partnering in the construction business three years ago, he warned contractors against adopting this new way of doing business too readily.

Partnering — developing formal agreements that supplement construction contracts and spell out how work should proceed — was too new, he felt, and fraught with potential legal ramifications.

"Thirteen partnering charters later I realized how wrong I was," Stephenson says with a wry grin.

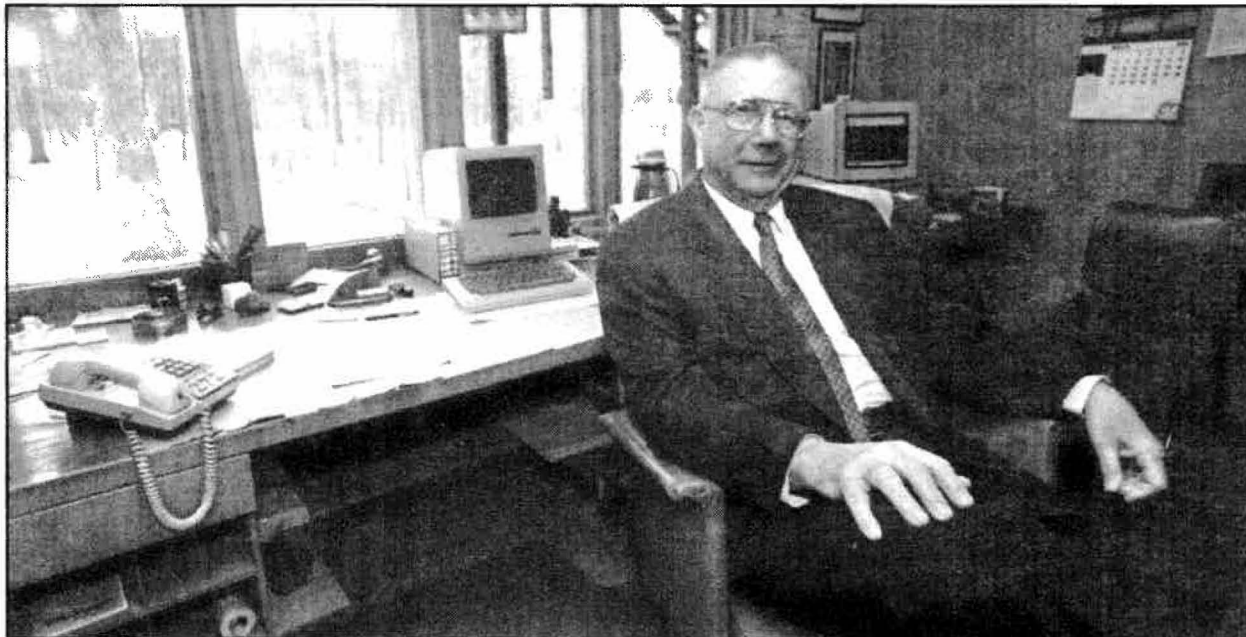
It isn't often that Stephenson, an engineer for nearly 50 years, is wrong about professional matters.

Considered by some industry heavyweights to be a construction expert and one of Michigan's unsung heroes, Stephenson has crafted a stellar career planning and designing construction projects.

He also is a mentor to young people, sometimes as many as 10 at once, is considering writing a book — and still helps bring big projects to fruition.

He's working on construction planning and scheduling for a \$200-million entertainment complex for the Saginaw Chippewa tribe just outside of Mt. Pleasant. And he recently finished planning and scheduling an \$8.9-million renovation of the Pillsbury Mansion in Minneapolis.

Stephenson calls the partnering charter, or agreement, the etiquette book to guide planners, architects, engineers and owners through a project's noncontractual matters, such as payment and handling paperwork, and



Ralph Stephenson has a comfortable home-office — with a view — on the ground floor of his Mt. Pleasant home.

RODNEY BRAZEE/Special to the Free Press

outlining steps to take if problems occur. The concept originated about a decade ago with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

While Stephenson has not written partnering charters outside the construction industry, he believes they could be applied to any project with a defined beginning and end.

Stephenson says the main purpose is to reduce the number of costly legal claims resulting from problems in a project.

Rather than framing the issue as a matter of who's right and who's wrong, Stephenson thinks it's better to focus on creating win-win situations for everyone. And partnering is one way he does that.

"We have been taught that there always has to be a winner and a loser — that's called a sum-zero game," he says. "But we can define winning in different ways. You can have all winners — it's just that some people may win more than others."

Since his first partnering agreement two years ago on the \$450-million Veterans Administration Hospital project in Detroit, he's been asked to facilitate partnering sessions for a variety of clients, including manufacturing and insurance companies, a community college and an airport authority.

Stephenson travels across the country frequently to conduct seminars on partnering, project management and other planning systems. He estimates that he's conducted close to 600 seminars over the years.

John Wiley & Sons, the New York publisher, recently asked Stephenson to write a book on partnering. He is mulling the contract.

Asked if, at age 71, he is considering retirement, Stephenson replies, "I am retired. I'm doing exactly what I want to do!"

A large bear of a man with a silver brush cut, he has a cautious demeanor and exacting standards that carry over into the workplace. Incompetence and disloyalty make him angry and he admits that he's still working on controlling a pesky bad temper.

After World War II, Stephenson went to work as a structural engineer at the major Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman

and Grylls. He subsequently worked at other area architectural, engineering and design-build firms. In 1962, he started his own consulting firm, specializing in providing operational and management direction to owners, designers and contracting firms.

Stephenson grew up on the west side of Detroit and in Highland Park. His father was a police department radio operator who developed and installed the United States' second two-way radio system. After his father's death when Stephenson was 9, his mother worked various jobs to support the family — cleaning apartments, baking holiday fruitcakes, waitressing, selling baked goods at a nearby bakery and working as a matron at the RKO Theatre in Highland Park.

Money was scarce, but Stephenson won a music scholarship to what was then known as Lawrence Institute of Technology, where he pursued a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and played trumpet in the band. While there, he formed his own orchestra, playing at area nightclubs and for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Stephenson married his childhood sweetheart in 1948. He and his wife, Betty, raised their three children in Rosedale Park. The couple lived there until four years ago, when they moved to Mt. Pleasant.

His wife is secretary-treasurer of his engineering firm. "But actually, in all seriousness, she's the boss," Stephenson says. "Betty schedules my work, makes my travel arrangements and tells me where I'm going to go each week. All I do is show up. I couldn't be in business without her, nor would I want to be."

The couple rises every day at 5 a.m. and begins their workday at 6:15 in their home-office.

He makes it a habit to spend an hour each morning saying prayers and reading the Bible. He estimates that he's read the Bible six to seven times since 1976. "I'm in the book of Joshua now," he says. "It reads like a newspaper. Jericho is being conquered and the Gaza Strip is still eluding everyone. . ."

The former Sunday School teacher be-

lieves prayer "keeps you aware of what other people's problems are and what you can do to help them."

Putting his belief into practice, Stephenson makes a conscious effort to mentor five to 10 young people in the industry at any given time. He is, in effect, acting on the advice of one of his early mentors — a trumpet teacher — who told him, "Teach anybody who will listen everything you know."

His wife describes his mentoring philosophy: "Ralph feels that the engineering business has been so good to him that he wants to give back to the profession what he has gained from it and more."

"He tries to help everyone who has a problem and will go out of his way to help them. People are always calling him and he's always giving them advice and seeing people and taking care of them. He never charges people. He considers it part of overhead."

One business leader who considers Stephenson a mentor is Ron Hausmann, president and chief operating officer of Walbridge Aldinger, a leading Detroit general contractor. Hausmann was a junior engineer at Walbridge when he met Stephenson 20 years ago.

"Many of us who have been in the construction industry for 10 to 20 years learned a lot about the emotions of the construction industry from Ralph," Hausmann says. "He's kind of like a godfather to many of us. He taught and still continues to teach young construction engineers about the aspects of fairness in the construction and contracting business. It's not something that's easily taught, but it's most definitely necessary."

He calls Stephenson one of the "unsung heroes" of the industry for his technical expertise and sense of fair play. "He was getting us to partner to solve our own disputes among ourselves as businessmen rather than with lawyers long before partnering initiatives and quality initiatives became buzzwords," he says. "I just hope he continues helping our industry for another 40 years because we need his ideas and his heart."

## RALPH STEPHENSON

**JOB:** engineer and consultant.

**PERSONAL:** 71, lives in Mt. Pleasant with his wife, Betty.

**LAST BOOK READ:** "The Story of Civilization" by Will and Ariel Durant.

**HOBBIES:** Reading, writing, travel and golf.

**GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT:** "My greatest achievements occur on any project that is successful."

**GREATEST DISAPPOINTMENT:** "I don't have any major disappointment."

**BEST BUSINESS ADVICE:** "Always be the first one to accept something new and the last one to reject something old."