



PHOTOS: BLUEFISH STUDIOS

CEA LIEUTENANT
GOVERNOR'S AWARD

FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

A True Success Story

By the time Dimitri Papanicolas immigrated to Canada in 1980, he had already lived in three other countries. But Edmonton became the city he helped build, the city he gave back to, and the city he now calls home.

Papanicolas is the recipient of the 2017 Consulting Engineers of Alberta Lieutenant-Governor's Award, recognizing his more than 30 years of service with Thurber Engineering Ltd. – the only firm he has ever worked for in Canada – and his contributions to the community, especially through his involvement with the Edmonton Strathcona Rotary Club.

"It's something that never crossed my mind," Papanicolas says of the award. "Thurber is a medium-sized company, and generally we don't work as the prime consultant on a project; most of the time, we subcontract to another consultant. So to get recognition like this, it's an honour for me and an honour for Thurber, which gave me the platform to work with them."

"Dimitri has shown leadership in the growth of Thurber, but he is also someone who has really seen the rationale and reasoning to give back to his community," adds Ken Pilip, chief executive officer and registrar of the CEA.

Papanicolas was born to Greek parents in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he first decided to be an engineer because of his good grades in math and science classes, and became a mining engineer because of the country's strong mining industry. Just as he graduated in 1974, his family was forced to leave due to political turmoil, and he went to the United Kingdom to pursue a master's degree in rock and soil mechanics engineering from Imperial College of Science and Technology – University of London. Then, after a brief stint at an underground metal mine in his parents' homeland of Greece, he made the move to Canada and, on the advice of a professor at the University of Alberta, got an interview at Thurber Consultants Ltd. (now Thurber Engineering Ltd.) with Dr. P.K. Chatterji, who offered him a job.

Decades later, Papanicolas says he never seriously entertained the idea of leaving Thurber. He started at the technologist level and eventually worked his way up to the position of chief operating officer and managing director of the firm, working alongside his colleague, business partner and friend Robin Tweedie.

"Thurber looked after its employees, and tried the best they could to improve their professional careers. They always genuinely cared about you as a person," he says. "The working relationship with the people was great."

Papanicolas was the main driver in growing of Thurber's Edmonton office by adding geo-environmental engineering to their geotechnical practice, expanding in construction materials engineering (soil, concrete and asphalt), and opening a Fort McMurray office. Today, Thurber has grown to 300 employees in nine offices across Canada. Papanicolas says it's a great thrill to see how much the firm has expanded and grown while still maintaining its specialized services. "It makes me feel good to be part of that," he says. And while he reduced his hours of work in 2013, Papanicolas continues to help Thurber thrive through a part-time role as a specialist consultant, mentoring young engineers on different projects and passing on the knowledge he has gathered over his career. "I continue to learn from them also," he adds. In 2013, Papanicolas was awarded the Stan Thomson Geotechnical Society Award; this award recognizes an individual's contribution to the development and growth of the Geotechnical Society of Edmonton and to geotechnical/geo-environmental engineering in the Edmonton area.

Aside from his technical and mentoring work, though, Papanicolas also gives back to the Edmonton community through his Rotary work. He has been a member of the Edmonton Strathcona Rotary Club since 1993, but he says that it has only been in retirement that he has really been able to commit to it. He is the club's president for 2016-2017.

"I have the time now, and I can help people in our community that are in need," he says. "There are a lot of inner city schools that need assistance with the newcomers, particular learners, and increased poverty. There are a lot of families that appreciate our assistance. We help the homeless or the unfortunate ones who go through challenging times in their lives. As Rotarians, we offer our services and support whenever we can to local community centres such as YESS [Youth Empowerment and Support Services], the Mustard Seed, WIN House, and others. It doesn't take long; it just takes being there and recognizing the call to help your fellow people."

Reflecting on his journey, Papanicolas expresses great gratitude for living most of his life in Canada, a country that welcomes immigrants and gives equal opportunity to all.