Young Engineer Spotlight Interview

This month I had the chance to talk with Allison “Ally” Toonen-Talamo, an Associate III at Klein & Hoffman. A Texas native, Ally grew up in San Antonio before moving to Chicago for college at Illinois Institute of Technology. She completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees at IIT before starting full-time at K&H. As a forensic architect, she has experience working with several materials that may comprise the façade of a building. While she’s worked on buildings of all shapes and sizes, historical and vintage properties have been a focus of hers. She’s a specialist in cast iron specifically but has been involved with inspections and repairs for concrete and masonry façade components as well.

While her role allows her to wear several hats and make use of various skillsets, in particular she enjoys being tasked with tracking down original drawings from historical societies and libraries such as the Art Institute or Chicago History Museum. On one of her projects in the Loop originally designed by Daniel Burnham, she recalled the excitement when the original shop drawings, over 100 years old, were coincidentally discovered in the attic of the building. When trying to understand the story of an existing building façade, few things can be more valuable to a forensic architect than a clean, legible copy of the historic drawings.

As a member of SEAOI, Ally has attended numerous social, professional, and volunteer events hosted by the Young Engineers Committee. Her involvement with Landmarks Illinois’ Skyline Council as well has led to the YEC and Skyline Council beginning to partner on some events, with hopefully more to come. Read on for my discussion with Ally!

Joe Porada (Interviewer): What profession other than your own would you like to attempt? What profession would you not like to do?

Ally Toonen-Talamo (Interviewee): Law and probably gear it towards construction related issues would be the profession I would like to try, and medicine would be the profession I would not like to do.

JP: Why did you decide to choose structural engineering?

AT: I come from a funny background. I originally started at IIT as a dual major in aerospace and mechanical engineering then reconsidered when NASA was getting limited funding and the aviation industry was not doing well. Since I needed a more stable career path and knew I wanted to be in the field of engineering, I looked at other options IIT had to offer. Once I learned they had a joint program in architecture for my bachelors and structural engineering for my masters, I knew this was the route I wanted and have been very happy with my career switch.

JP: What do you enjoy most about working at your company?

AT: Being able to be part of Chicago's history. As part of my job, I get to hang off the sides of buildings on swing-stages to do inspections or investigative work. At times, this work may not have been seen by a person for a good 20+ years. There are many aspects I love about my job:

the type of work I do, interacting with the client and building staff, learning about the history of the property, becoming a detective to understand why the building components are failing and, of course, the views.

JP: Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

AT: Closer to being a partner at my firm and earning the title of expert for cast iron.

JP: What has been the most gratifying moment, thus far, of your young career?

AT: That is a tough one. I would say being awarded the 2020 American Express Aspire Award presented by the National Trust and being listed in 2021 as one of the 50Foward Influencers for Landmarks Illinois. I rarely take the time to step back to see the bigger picture of what I'm doing at my firm, within the community, or at the state level. These awards bring into reality the positive impact I have within my community, acknowledge the inspiration I am to younger generations and keep me motivated in what I do.

JP: What is one piece of advice you would like to share with other young engineers?

AT: Constantly evolve, whether it is personal growth, education, learning new tricks of the trade or even finding ways to challenge yourself. Never let yourself be comfortable. If you feel stuck, find a way to work around it. Set 3-5 professional goals for yourself so you can hold yourself accountable for where you want to be in your career.

JP: What is something fun you enjoy doing on the weekends?

AT: Sleeping is nice... but if I am not volunteering for one of the organizations I serve on, I am generally training for a race. Within the last 2 years, I have been running with a jogging club or other groups to help with my marathon training. Since I have just completed one bucket list item of doing a marathon, I have a friend who is willing to train for an ultra with me.

Besides hanging out with friends, another thing I love to do is explore our city. As most people know, my brain is constantly in preservation mode and a majority of my friends are in the same boat. Many times, we all meet up with a baked good in hand, a cup of coffee, and do our own walking tours of a Chicago neighborhood. We like to compare notes on architecture styles and repairs we can see from the street. A bunch of nerds, I know…

JP: What's your favorite part of living and working in Chicago?

AT: Easy! The vast amount of architecture and engineering this city has to offer. Even though I didn't have a clue what architecture or structural engineering meant to me early on in my studies, I lucked out by switching my major while living here. The city has always been my real-life textbook when I was at IIT.

JP: What are the qualities you look for in a mentor?

AT: Thinking outside the box and resourcefulness. I have a handful of mentors from different parts of my academic/professional career and each individual offers me a different viewpoint on how I should view myself and my future. They also challenge me to learn something new that could be beneficial to me.

JP: Are you involved with any groups or clubs outside engineering?

AT: Yes, probably way too many. Here are the groups I am involved with:

- Serves as Vice-Chair on the Board of Directors for Landmarks Illinois - Executive Committee
- Serves as Chair for Landmarks Illinois' Board Development Committee
- Member of the Skyline Council of Landmarks Illinois
- Member of the Association for Preservation and Technology (Western Great Lakes Chapter)
- Member of the Association for Preservation Technology International - Preservation Engineering Technical Committee
- Serves on the Board of Directors for Evanston Community Lakehouse and Gardens
- Member of the Structural Engineers Association of Illinois
- Member of the Campaign for Where Women Made History National Advisory Council

JP: What's the best vacation you have ever taken?

AT: Spain hands down. When I was eight, my mom took my middle sister and me to visit some family there. We spent about a month in that country exploring different cities and learning the culture. I would like to think that trip impacted my brain to appreciate urban planning and architecture.

JP: What's your favorite book? TV show? Movie?

AT: My favorite books are *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald.

Movies: *Roman Holiday*, *Top Gun* and *Forrest Gump* are at the top of my list.

TV shows: *Downton Abbey*.

JP: If you could have dinner with anyone (real or fictitious, dead or alive) who would you choose? Why?

AT: Albert Einstein without a question.

This is when the ultimate nerd comes out for me, but I secretly have a huge fascination with quantum mechanics (probably due to my love with space and aviation). I just find his background so fascinating. I read once that if he got stuck on a problem, he would play his violin to figure it out. As a fellow musician I loved that!

JP: What's one of your favorite or most memorable projects that you've worked on in your career thus far?

AT: There are two projects I did before K&H that I hold dear to my heart: the historic Ford Tri-Motor Hangar in Lansing, IL and the Harley Clarke Estate in Evanston, IL. Both properties were class projects of mine. One became a job (the Ford Hangar) while the other became an advocacy victory; I watched the Evanston community band together to make sure the Harley Clarke was not demolished.

At K&H, I would say performing a Condition Assessment for the Muddy Waters property (MOJO Museum) and the Klas Restaurant in the Chicago area. Muddy Waters is currently undergoing work to be restored as a house museum as well as community studio to give a sense of place for musicians. The Klas Restaurant is currently vacant and a local community group is working on purchasing the property. Their goal is to restore the restaurant to its former glory so it can serve as a new community event space.

All of these properties are gems to their communities and have a deep history, not only to the neighborhood but to Chicago as a whole. I'm glad to be part of their history and help revitalize them for a new life.

JP: As you have gotten older, what would you say has become more important to you? Less important?

AT: More important: Stay true to yourself, your beliefs, listen, give back to your community and be humble. Watch who you keep in your company. Learn to walk away from toxic people who are not a benefit to your well-being and listen to your gut.

Less important: Stop worrying about what other people think of you. I struggle with this a lot.

JP: Great talking with you, Ally, and thanks for taking the time!