



M. MIKE ALIZADEH, P.E.
1932 – 2007

OUR MEMORIES

When someone important in our life dies, our minds invariably begin to race with the memories of special times and places shared with that person. Whether that significant person was a father, mother, spouse, friend, mentor, or just someone we admired from a distance, our memories continue to live and serve to endear us to them even more as we pass through our own years. Mike Alizadeh was that special person to me and so many, many other people. It has been nearly a month since Mike died, and I know there have been floods of tears shed by those who loved him most and by those who will miss him most. Along with the tears, there have been memory after memory shared by those who knew Mike. Even when competitors have called to offer their condolences, the conversation almost always included, "You know, I remember when Mike" and they would go on to share an experience they had with Mike. Professionally, Mike will be remembered for his exceptional work as a structural/geotechnical engineer on such projects as Ameren's (Union Electric) Rush Island Power Plant, the Mansion House in St. Louis, the Seven's building in Clayton, and the new Lock and Dam 26 in Alton, Illinois. Thousands of projects have benefited from Mike's combined expertise as a licensed structural engineer and renowned geotechnical engineer. I could, and probably should, write a book about Mike's engineering successes. However, it was not great projects by which Mike measured his own success, but rather by the men and women with whom he was associated. So then, *Our Memories* is not about piles or piers, or foundation settlement or landslides, but rather the personal side of Mike Alizadeh that so many of us came to know, admire and love.

I went to work for Mike in 1976 when he hired me to expand and manage his soils laboratory. We had been introduced through a mutual friend, and it was my first experience with someone actually practicing the Engineering Code of Ethics. Our friend told me that I would have to make the call to Mike if I was interested in the position; although Mike and I had met previously, he would not call me because I was employed by another engineering firm. That set the stage, not only for what would be a 30-year relationship with Mike, but for how I should conduct myself throughout my career. Mike was the consummate professional, inherently honest and ethical in dealing with clients and staff alike. Those who know me personally know that I credit Mike for almost everything I have and what I have been able to achieve in my career. My son was born a few months after I went to work for Mike, and my daughter was born two years later. I think they were Mike's first Geo-Babies." My father died suddenly at an early age just six years after I went to work for Mike. I was a resident engineer on a project in Washington D.C. at the time, and Mike did everything in his power to get me back to Texas as soon as possible. It was the first time that I had experienced the compassionate side of Mike Alizadeh; he was truly saddened by my loss, and in the years to follow I would witness his compassion on

many occasions. Mike was truly concerned about all of his employees and their families. He rarely came into our offices without asking about our spouses and our children.

In the past few weeks I have recalled dozens of special Mike memories, but it would only be a self-serving attempt at trying to dispel my personal sadness if I mentioned all of them. There are a few memories, though, that I am compelled to share with you. My first engineering assignment from Mike was to calculate the level of groundwater that would have been required to float a reinforced concrete, wastewater treatment tank out of the ground; it had happened and we had been retained to determine why. A few hours later, I walked into Mike's office and proudly handed him my calculations, neatly organized on our new calculation sheets bearing our company logo. Mike quickly looked at them, handed them back to me, and said "I'm sure that you can do better than this." I recalculated, and even drew scale sketches to back up my conclusion. Again, Mike handed the sheets back to me with the urging to do better. It was after the fourth attempt, and with the same reaction from Mike, that I expressed my frustration and declared that I couldn't do any better, to which Mike replied, "This is fine, thank you very much." Several years later I mustered enough confidence to ask Mike about this project and why he hadn't insisted that I try again. He told me that my first attempt had been satisfactory, but that as long as I was willing to keep changing it, he was willing to let me.

Mike's mind knew no boundaries, technically or geographically. He thought in terms of a global economy long before it became a popular media phrase. The phone rang one Friday evening while my family and I were having dinner. It was Mike with my next assignment. He had made arrangements for me to fly to Saudi Arabia on Monday to set up a lab for a friend of his and work on an airfield site selection project. He didn't think it would take "more than a few weeks." How do you tell your boss that you don't have a passport? After all, the only two countries outside the U.S. that I had ever visited didn't require them. He was incredulous. I thought that I was off the hook, but Mike's solution was to have me fly to Chicago, hand carry my passport application through the U.S. Customs passport office, then fly to Saudi Arabia. I returned a few weeks later with a much more global perspective and a passion for Persian coffee.

A few years later, after many more projects, and with an established mutual trust and respect, I gained another insight to the personal side of Mike. We were driving east on Highway 40 to attend a SAME lunch meeting. We were enjoying polite chit chat when out of the blue Mike declared, "John, you and Ron (Eckelkamp) and I have really good wives." Mike went on to explain how he thought it took a really special woman to put up with the hours that we worked, the out-of-town jobs, the phone calls at home in the evenings and on weekends, and with the times that it may have seemed that we were more married to the company than to them.

Let me share one more personal Mike story, and I'll give way to others who wanted to be included in *Our Memories*. Have you ever seen Mike cry? Yes, I mean Mike Alizadeh! On a number of occasions, Mike shared with me that the most difficult time in his life had been the very short year after Ron Eckelkamp was diagnosed with lymphoma, culminating in his death at an all too early age. For several years it was almost impossible for Mike to talk about Ron's death. Ron had been one of Mike's biggest successes as a mentor, but the relationship had gone beyond business; Ron had become a valued and trusted associate, and personal friend. Many years later, after Mike had retired to his beloved Coronado Island in San Diego, he and Pouran

were visiting in St. Louis for the holidays, and as he always did, Mike visited the office and went door to door, spending a few minutes with each of us. We spoke for a few moments, trading questions about family and retirement life, then I saw Mike's eyes fill with tears. He must have seen the question in my eyes, to which he quietly answered, "I still miss Ron."

Okay, just one more, and on a lighter note. Did you know that Mike had a great sense of humor? Yes, I mean our Mike Alizadeh! One of Mike's closest friends, and one that I suspect encouraged Mike to retire in California, was Dr. Gus Rau, P.E., Ph.D., a structural engineer from Iraq, with a consulting practice in St. Louis. The Iran-Iraq war was in full gear. I was sitting in Mike's office one day when he answered the phone and said, (you have to close your eyes and remember Mike's accent!) "Hello, this is Mike. No, I can't go to lunch with you. Our two countries are at war with each other!" He began to laugh, and continued to laugh after he hung up until he had tears in his eyes, then looked at me with an almost straight face and jokingly asked, "How could I go to lunch with Gus when we are bombing each other?"

Many who received the news of Mike's death have called, e-mailed and written to express their condolences to Mike's family and to his associates at Geotechnology. Employees who knew him well, and those who have only heard of him have shared their thoughts and memories. Here are just a few of the many that I thought should be included in *Our Memories*.

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"Mike was the best structural engineer I ever knew. He was also the best geotechnical engineer I ever met. He paid attention to every little detail. He was a good friend."

Jacque Darvish, P.E. – EDM, Inc.

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"I remember a few times Mike caught me by surprise. I was not in St. Louis long when I expressed an opinion on a subject and Mike took the other side and began debating the issue. After a quick vigorous discussion he quickly agreed with me and changed the subject. After this happened a couple of times I realized that Mike liked to discuss issues in a debate type format. He did not care which side he or I took; he just wanted to quickly verbalize the pros and cons of each side before he would finalize his decision. The rapid fire speed of these discussions would leave my head spinning.

He was very quick in sizing up a situation. It did not matter if he started off on the right foot; when he realized that he was not going in the right direction he would make immediate corrections. I once commented to a new engineer "Do not follow Mike too closely; he can change directions and run you over before you know what happened". Mike's instincts were excellent, but if he was wrong he would make the necessary corrections and not look back."

Chris Groves, P.E. – Shannon & Wilson, Inc.

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“I didn’t much like being in business with Mike, but I always liked doing engineering with him. I have met few engineers if his capabilities in my career. Mike’s greatest talent was getting younger engineers to perform at a high level. His standards were extremely high, and he would not accept lesser performance.

Chris (Groves) and I have reminisced that he was particularly good at making us defend our ideas by taking an opposed position even if he knew we were correct. He would force us to defend our work, and the results were always an improvement.”

Richard Frueh, P.E. – Shannon & Wilson, Inc.

“Mike would stop by my office to see how things were going. We discussed many topics ranging from construction dewatering to the tech stock bubble (that he knew would burst). I have fond memories of my conversations with Mike. He mesmerized me with both his business knowledge and engineering expertise. He took the time to show that he cared. I miss him.”

Kenny Hemmen – Geotechnology, Inc.

“During my college years with Ed, I met Mike but did not develop a relationship with him until I came to work for Geotechnology in 1989. Mike was my first mentor concerning the business and financial workings of a company. His business ethics and constant demand to provide technically superior work in a responsive manner drove me to perform at levels that I did not think I could attain. I failed miserably on a few projects early in my career. Mike was there to guide me through the mess I created and allowed me to take the beating from the client that I deserved. Not once did Mike embarrass me or diminish me; he used this as a coaching tool to improve me as a person and a manager. The lessons I learned there I use every day and pass them on to those that I now mentor.

Mike was a demanding boss, but an eminently fair one. His willingness to share much of his insight into the financial operations and performance of Geotechnology made me a much better manager to this day. He taught me that in order to be successful in a big way, one must pay attention to the details every day.”

Jim Howe, CFO – Geotechnology, Inc.

“My beginnings at Geotechnology began somewhat comically when I began calling Mike, incessantly, from the University of California, as to the possibility of coming on board. After one particular call, I thought that I had called once too many times, judging by the exasperated tone in his voice. Later, fortunately, Mike had a planned visit to California and was able to fit in an interview with me. I was hired based on that interview, for which I have always been grateful and have felt a special bond with Mike. He was always interested in what I and all other employees were working on. He would share my enthusiasm regarding the development of new services and would encourage me to consider new approaches that would “separate us from

everyone else.”

But I especially remember when Mike came to my office some time after Ron died. Up to that time, most of his visits focused on interesting project activities or technical discussions. On this particular visit, with no project discussion, Mike merely sat across from me and spent the entire time expressing how much he appreciated my work and how it's the employees that make the company a success. I look back at that discussion as one of the biggest confidence-boosters of my career.

Anyway, those are just a few thoughts...”

Douglas W. Lambert, R.G. – Geotechnology, Inc.

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“Unfortunately, I don’t have too many recollections of Mike. I came on at a time when Mike was easing into retirement. He still had the large office in the old building, but came in just a few times during the year. I do remember asking Mike one time to accompany me to a MetroLink design meeting; he willingly agreed of course. STV, Inc. engineers from Chicago and New York were present, knew of Mike’s credentials and intently listened when he talked. Afterwards we lunched and, more importantly, just talked. It was a good day mixing business with pleasure. I will miss him.”

Matt McQuality, P.E. – Geotechnology, Inc.

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“He was our **Mentor**, he was **Instrumental** in motivating us, he was a **Kind** person, he was an **Entrepreneur**; and yes, he was, as we all know, **MIKE**. Mike was not only a mentor to me but a father figure who held my hand and taught me how to walk on the path of practice of geotechnical engineering. Mike told me once, there are only a few fundamental concepts in geotechnical engineering but how you apply them to a wide range of situations make you a successful geotechnical engineer. My sincere thanks to Pouran and Ed, who allowed me to hold Mike’s hand on July 23, 2007 and personally convey my heartiest gratitude for everything he did for me. Mike will always be among us. Let’s all keep Mike’s legacy alive by practicing what he taught us.”

Sanjeev Kumar, P.E., Ph.D. – Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

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“Life affords us some wonderful opportunities. One of mine was meeting Mike through being employed at Geotechnology. I met Mike for the first time in the spring of 1986. At that time I was a graduate student and was about to graduate. Mike offered me a job in his fledgling company, and I joined Geotechnology in June 1986.

Mike was a great entrepreneur. He wanted to start a premier geotechnical company in St. Louis, and he achieved that by creating Geotechnology. Although by training he was a structural engineer, he had a very good understanding of geotechnical theories and was able to mentor young engineers like myself.

Mike generally talked to me in broad terms about projects. During several instances when I didn't know the answer to some technical question he asked, he would immediately say, "Go and refer to my Rush Island report." I got the impression that was his favorite or one of the favorite projects of his career.

His love for his family was very apparent. He understood that employees are the most precious asset of his company, and treated them like his family. He was well liked by his colleagues and employees.

Now he is at rest, and those of us who were lucky enough to have known him will always remember him as the Gentleman."

Senthil Kumar, P.E. – Geotechnology, Inc.*

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Our Memories was written and collected by John Baker, P.E., Senior Vice President, Geotechnology, Inc. John worked for Mike from 1976 until 1984 when he was invited by Mike to participate in founding Geotechnology and continued his association with Mike until Mike's retirement in 2001.

*Senthil Kumar was the first high-level geotechnical engineer hired by Mike after he founded Geotechnology; Senthil has been with the firm more than 21 years.