



Back to Bethlehem: Where it all began...

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Report on Lehigh Visit

April 2011

by [Antony Wood](#)

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For a lady in her early eighties, Mrs. Ella Beedle is incredibly sprightly, agile and just "with it." I have to admit that, as I bundled my wife, children and umbrellas out of the car and up the garden path to meet Ella and her daughter Helen waiting in the doorway of their house in the light patter of a Pennsylvania rain, I felt somewhat bizarrely emotional at this "reunion." I say bizarrely not because of the emotion – Ella and I had been sending correspondence for some time and had exchanged numerous memories of the Council, Lynn Beedle and family generally such that a bond had certainly developed between us – but because the whole thing felt like a reunion or a return: both the meeting of the Beedle family and the visit to Bethlehem and Lehigh, where it had all began for the Council. And yet how could it be a reunion or a return, when I had never visited either the place or the people before. Let me step back a little...

When I arrived in Chicago to take up the executive directorship of the Council in 2006, one of the first tasks I undertook was to wade through the dusty boxes of our archives – uncovering the conference proceedings and other publications from the preceding 35 years that had laid unopened for a couple of years since the Council's move to Chicago from Bethlehem in 2004. I remember being struck with both an amazement of the history and a sense of responsibility as I thumbed through these documents, back to the very first charter outlining the vision for the ASCE-IABSE "Joint Committee on Tall Buildings" (which would eventually become the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat) created by [Dr Lynn Beedle](#), [Fazlur Khan](#), [Les Robertson](#) and others ([see more on the early history of the Council here](#)). Right then and there I had wanted to visit Lehigh to learn more. Even though the desire was keen, five years later in post I had still not quite managed it.



Mrs. Ella Beedle with Lynn Beedle's 'traveling' shirt



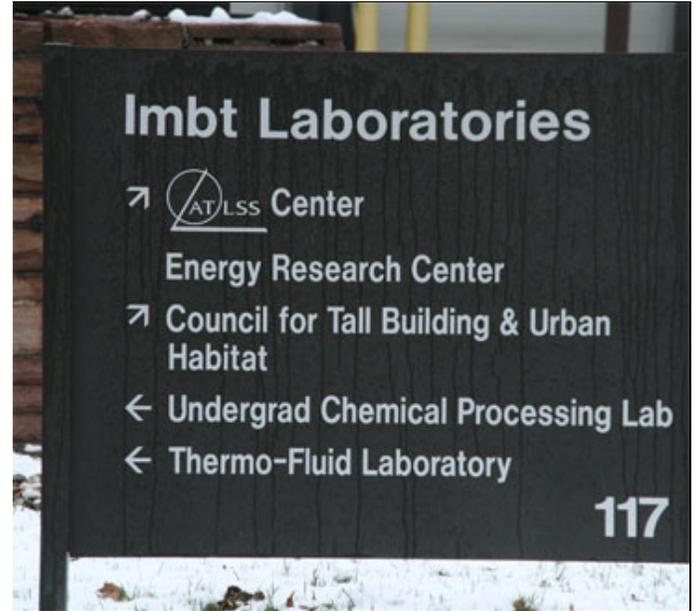
Visit to the Beedle Family home in Hellertown Pennsylvania. From left: Helen Beedle, Jasmine Wood, Mrs. Ella Beedle, Joshua Wood, Tansri Wood, Antony Wood

A number of influences happily combined in late March that finally made the trip possible: our immediate past-Chairman [David Scott](#) was a speaker at Lehigh as part of the [Fazlur Rahman Khan Distinguished Lecture](#) series organized by Professor Dan Frangopol; our previous Operations Manager and CTBUH staff member for 30 years [Geri Kery](#) had (I am delighted to report) secured a new position within the [Iacocca Institute's](#) "Global Village" at Lehigh and invited me to discuss possible areas of overlap with the Council; the librarians at Lehigh

had granted our request to have a look at the Lehigh-based CTBUH archive; and we were scheduled to hold both our annual [Board of Trustees](#) meeting, and third meeting of the [CTBUH Research, Academic and Postgraduate working group](#) in New York, just a short drive from Bethlehem to the east. As it happened, the dates for David's lecture didn't end up coinciding with the New York meetings, but I elected to take the trip to Bethlehem anyway and, for the first time in five years in post, also take my own family with me on a business trip.



Geri Kery in the first home of the CTBUH: the Fritz Laboratory at Lehigh University



Traces of the CTBUH still at Lehigh, 7 years after the move to Chicago!

I already knew that there was no natural connection between Bethlehem and tall buildings before arriving in the town, so I wasn't surprised to find a relatively small, low-key urbanity with a somewhat "mid-west" feel to it. I also knew prior to my visit of the strong connection between the city and Bethlehem Steel. Though long since gone, I wasn't surprised to see the strong legacy evident in the abandoned factory buildings and huge steel blast furnaces towering over the city. What I perhaps wasn't prepared for was just the pleasantness of the place, its charming historic high street, and the undulation of the terrain. Having once set out from the flat plane of Chicago to discover the "mountains" of north-west Illinois (in and around Galena) that numerous US friends had told me about (only to be somewhat disappointed with the scale of it), I had printed out the map to the "Lehigh Mountain Campus" with some skepticism. But those are real hills in Bethlehem, and walking around the campus is much more than just a pleasant stroll.

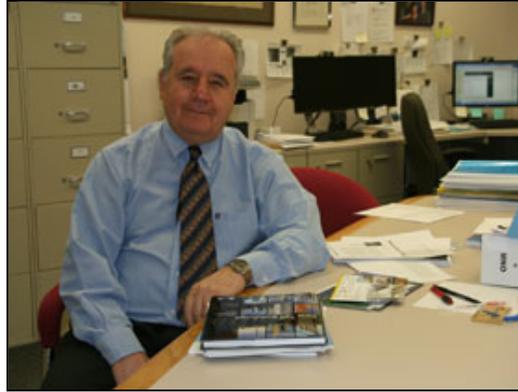


Bethlehem Steel Blast Furnaces

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of Lynn Beedle since Lynn's passing in 2004, and her daughter Helen to share a few more stories on Lynn and the Council. Ella and Helen had been preparing to attend the Council's [40th Anniversary celebration](#) in Chicago in 2009, but had unfortunately been unable to attend at the last minute because of a death in the family. So I was pleased that I was able to bring them a copy of the [reflective brochure](#) we had produced, as well as some other Council publications. We spent a very happy couple of hours at the Beedle home, in the warmth of Ella's southern hospitality, talking of things present and past. One of the many things Ella showed us was a shirt of Lynn's on which he would write the name of every city he had visited on CTBUH business. Ella also sent us away with a loan of various scrap albums of historic newspaper clippings for us to scan for the Council's archive.

I next went on to the Lehigh Campus itself (while my children lost themselves in deep abandonment in the nearby Crayola Factory!), where I had lunch with Professor Frangopol and discussed possible stronger collaborations between the Council and Lehigh. After that, I met with Lois Black, Ilhan Citak, Eleanor Nothelfer and Sharon Siegler in the special collections of the Linderman Library, where I viewed a couple of the 50 boxes of CTBUH material that Lehigh are now in the process of documenting. Knowing what a fastidious collector of all correspondence Lynn Beedle was, I know that this will not be a quick task!



Professor Dan Frangopol, distinguished Fazlur R. Khan Chair at Lehigh University



Linderman Library Special Collections staff: from left, Ilhan Citak, Eleanor Nothelfer, Sharon Siegler, Lois Black

My final visit of the day was to drop in on Geri in her new role at the Iacocca Institute (Lee Iacocca was President and CEO of Chrysler Motors and generally acknowledged for the company's revival in the 1980s). I have to admit that the visit left me with some envy at the set up and spatial environment there – knowing how cramped we are at Council Headquarters back at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, but I was also very pleased that Geri has found a great new place to work. Geri also gave me her own personal tour of Lehigh and took me to the Council's first home in the Fritz Laboratory, with its huge million pound testing machine. My wife and kids turned up again not long after, armed with bags full of Crayola crayons they had made themselves, and then it was time to head to New York for more formal meetings the next day. With some contentment that I had finally seen the birthplace of the Council and learned some of its early history, we waved goodbye to Geri and Lehigh, at least for a while, and headed back past the huge steel mills to the Big Apple...



Geri Kery in her new office at Lehigh's Global Village within the Iacocca Institute



My thanks go out to the following people for their assistance to this trip: Geri Kery for coordinating the whole thing (many thanks Geri!); Professor Frangopol for his time and taking me to lunch in the Lehigh faculty club; Lois Black, Ilhan Citak, Eleanor Nothelfer and Sharon Siegler for their time and showing me the CTBUH-Lehigh archive in the Linderman Library; and last but not least the Beedle family – and Ella in particular – for their time, generosity and unwavering support of the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat.

