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Building Bridges

THORNTON TOMASETTI HELPS COMMUNITIES AT HOME AND ABROAD

BY MICHELE MEYER

“When others say ‘No,’ we say, ‘Here’s how.’” That’s the mindset of Thornton Tomasetti, the New York City-based organization of engineers, scientists, architects, and other professionals.

With nearly 50 offices around the globe, Thornton Tomasetti has worked on many of the world’s tallest skyscrapers, including the 128-floor Shanghai Tower and Manhattan’s 101-floor 30 Hudson Yards.

The firm’s community service goals are also sky-high. “When I came here 12 years ago, I saw people volunteering on their own time,” says Corporate Responsibility Officer Amy Hattan. “I was touched by their generosity but realized there was no avenue to track and expand it.”

So Thornton Tomasetti established paid volunteer time in 2014 and launched Thornton Tomasetti Gives Back, a community service program that aims to boost the yearly hours employees give by 10 percent.

Under its partnership with Bridges to Prosperity, Thornton Tomasetti funds employee teams for the construction of pedestrian bridges in remote locations. Senior Principal Mark Coggin (pictured) was among the volunteers who constructed a 50-meter suspension bridge (inset) in Boca de Lura, Panama.



Along with volunteerism, the firm commits its financial support to various causes. Last year, Thornton Tomasetti and its independent, mostly scholarship-oriented 501(c)(3) Thornton Tomasetti Foundation gave \$467,000 to organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and the Global Orphan Project.

But Thornton Tomasetti Gives Back is about time, not money. It's driven by the hard work of the staff, via three programs: the Volunteer Days Program, the ACE Mentor Program, and Bridges to Prosperity.

HELPING NEIGHBORS

Employees can devote two salaried days each year to community projects. The first day involves personal passions such as

volunteering for animal shelters, serving at soup kitchens, or cleaning parks. The second day is a group effort linked to architecture or engineering.

Helping to organize such activities are the firm's Green Champions—60 corporate responsibility leaders who strive to meet Thornton Tomasetti's goal of operating carbon neutral by 2030.

"After the pandemic, our employees were eager to get out and have a hands-on experience," says Luis Mauricio-Perez, a senior engineer in Denver. "They are passionate about giving back to the community."

The Denver Green Champions used a \$1,000 Thornton Tomasetti Corporate Responsibility grant to spend a day cleaning up City Park near Thornton Tomasetti's office. "We spread 12 yards of mulch and collected 200 gallons of weeds and 240 gallons of debris that day," Mauricio-Perez says.

Employees in Philadelphia also groomed, mulched, and planted gardens of tomatoes and peppers at a local park.

"We created a welcoming space for the community," says Allison Partridge, project engineer in the Philadelphia office.

Hattan's Portland, Maine, office planted a garden at a local preschool and introduced children to organic produce. "The kids and teachers loved it, and it was a great bonding activity for our staff," she says.

"Being more hands-on also helps us with our work," Partridge says. "Connecting with the community makes you think more about your designs' impact."

BUILDING THE TALENT PIPELINE

Like many of her colleagues, Partridge devotes paid time off for mentoring school children through the ACE Mentor program. It inspires and trains 10,000 high school students nationally in architecture, construction, and engineering, with 90 percent of Thornton Tomasetti offices in the U.S. participating in the program.

The firm has been closely aligned with ACE Mentor since its 1994 beginnings, when Charles Thornton, a Thornton Tomasetti founder, helped devise the program to introduce high school students to the industry. The program also awards \$2.5 million in college scholarships to students each year.

"ACE Mentor's mission is to create a pipeline of new talent," says Geoff Dauksas, vice president in Thornton Tomasetti's Chicago office.

Mentors teach students the basics by helping them draw plans as architects and designers do, calculate costs as contractors would, construct models as engineers would, and then present their work. Some students go on to intern at Thornton Tomasetti or elsewhere.

"It's so inspiring to see them develop," Partridge says. "It reminds me why I became an engineer."

Last year, the firm's ACE Mentors devoted 2,000 hours to the program. Sixty-nine percent of the students are from minority groups, 40 percent are female, and 25 percent will be first-generation college students.

While sharing their expertise with the younger generation, mentors are also honing their own skills in project management while networking with fellow professionals.

"But the biggest reward is seeing these students succeed in the industry," says Dauksas. "Much of the credit goes to our team, who really care about the students and go that extra mile to help enrich the lives of others."

EXPANDING EFFORTS ACROSS THE WORLD

Nonprofit group Bridges to Prosperity builds footbridges in isolated and impoverished rural communities where rivers cut people off from schools, health care, and jobs.

"It's heartwrenching that people drown before a footbridge is built," Hattan says. "We can fix that while helping people become economically self-sufficient."

Partnering with Bridges to Prosperity, Thornton Tomasetti has built bridges in Panama and Rwanda. Teams of 10 employees, each of whom plays a specific role including project lead, construction lead, and community engagement liaison, spend two weeks on the projects.

The cost to Thornton Tomasetti has topped \$100,000 for materials, travel, and paid time off. That figure is expected to grow this year, when another team heads to Rwanda in July.

The human value is immeasurable, says Mark Coggin, senior principal in the Philadelphia office. He went to Panama during Thornton Tomasetti's 2018 international service trip.

"We rarely see how we make an impact on people's lives," he says. "We design on paper and interact with contractors. But I got to meet people who live a very simple life, who were so accepting of and thankful for our help."

The trip's destination was an isolated mountainous rainforest community that was a three-hour drive from Panama City.

"It wasn't even big enough to call a village," Coggin says. "It rained every day, and people couldn't cross the river until the torrents subsided. Mothers would have to guide their children through the river to get them to the school, which was just a concrete slab and a roof containing two classrooms."

Each evening, community members cooked meals for team members, who played soccer with the kids. When the bridge was done, "the community made a huge meal for us and played music," Coggin says.

But the biggest reward was seeing children walk across that bridge, Coggin says. He views things differently after having had that experience.

"My 'rough' commute is riding a train to work," he says. "I don't have to take crops on a horse through muddy roads in a rainforest. Now I appreciate things more and get upset less often. I took away a lot from that experience."

The diverse team built not just a bridge, but a bond among themselves. "We've stayed in touch," Coggin says. "We worked long, exhausting hours in hot, humid conditions, but nobody complained because it was such a worthy cause."

Many Thornton Tomasetti volunteers apply for such teams, Hattan says. "It's very sought-after. Employees come back so energized and say the experience was the best thing they've done in their lives."

"I know it changed me," Coggin says. "It's great to work at a place that values helping others and cares enough to make this happen." ■

Michele Meyer is a management and marketing writer based in Houston. She has written for *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*, and the *International Association of Business Communicators*.



Thanks to a pedestrian bridge constructed by Thornton Tomasetti and Bridges to Prosperity in Boca de Lura, Panama, community members can now access the local market, health center, and schools even during periods of extreme flooding.



"Being more hands-on also helps us with our work. Connecting with the community makes you think more about your designs' impact."

ALLISON PARTRIDGE
PROJECT ENGINEER
THORNTON TOMASETTI



"The biggest reward is seeing these students succeed in the industry. Much of the credit goes to our team, who really care about the students and go that extra mile to help enrich the lives of others."

GEOFF DAUKSAS
VICE PRESIDENT
THORNTON TOMASETTI



Thornton Tomasetti's Denver team helped clean up City Park, one of the area's largest green spaces, during a volunteer event organized by the office's Green Champions.

HIDDEN BENEFITS TO COMPANY GIVING

Volunteerism is good for the community and employees alike.

Volunteerism benefits recruitment. "Younger people especially are excited to help out," Hattan says.

Serving builds bonds between employees. "People connect to the company and to their coworkers," she says. "It builds trust and teamwork in a natural way."

Helping others can build an employee's soft skills. "Being involved in programs like ACE Mentor can boost a person's confidence and abilities," Hattan says. "It can impact everything from leadership to public speaking."

Clients take note. "They see you care about your community," Hattan says.



"It's great to work at a place that values helping others and cares enough to make this happen."

MARK COGGIN
SENIOR PRINCIPAL
THORNTON TOMASETTI



"After the pandemic, our employees were eager to get out and have a hands-on experience. They are passionate about giving back to the community."

LUIS MAURICIO-PEREZ
SENIOR ENGINEER
THORNTON TOMASETTI



"Employees come back so energized and say the experience was the best thing they've done in their lives."

AMY HATTAN
CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY OFFICER
THORNTON TOMASETTI