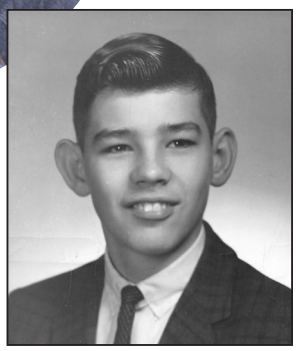
Phil Coop

Chairman & Co-Founder
EnSafe Inc.

EBJ Lifetime Achievement Award, 2023



Phil Coop, high school graduation, 1966

Phil Coop, Chairman and Co-Founder at EnSafe Inc. (Memphis, Tenn.), is an environmental consultant with more than 45 years' experience in environmental compliance, site remediation and strategic management of environmental risk. He co-founded EnSafe in 1980, a firm that has grown into one of the country's leading AEC firms with more than 25 locations nationwide, including 17 satellite offices and more than 390 employees. Today, EnSafe provides a wide range of engineering, environmental, health & safety, and information technology solutions, including environmental management and planning, environmental restoration, natural and water resources, and health and safety. Phil served as President and CEO of EnSafe for 23 years from 1990 to 2013. He was honored with a Distinguished Leadership Award by EFCG in 2013 and was inducted into the Society of Entrepreneurs in Memphis in 2011. He is giving retirement a wide berth and still enjoying managing "some of the coolest projects" of his career.

Founders of EnSafe: James Speakman, Principal Emeritus, Phil Coop, and Wendell Knight

EBJ: Where were you and what were you doing in the 1960s and '70s?

PC: I grew up on a farm in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, home of one of the oldest private boarding schools in the South – The Webb School – from which I graduated in 1966 with a strong interest in science. Then from 1966 to 1970 I was in college at Harvard. In the first years of the 70s I was teaching high school ecology and chemistry in Tennessee.

EBJ: What studies did you pursue at college?

PC: My degree was technically a double major of history and science (chemistry) in an honors program called History of Science. My interest was in the sociology of science – why do people become scientists? How do they work? How do they interact? How are they perceived in society? And in particular, how do science and public policy influence each other. That focus on science and public policy was excellent training for our industry. In fact, the greatest challenge of our industry today may be interpreting and implementing the environmental initiatives of policy makers.

EBJ: What inspired your interest in the environment?

PC: Simply put, it was Rachel Carson. I discovered Silent Spring, originally published in 1962, in 1967. This w o rk will inevitably be viewed by later generations as one of the greatest works of science advocacy ever written. Carson introduced the concept that protecting and improving our environment and human health should be the work of scientists and engineers. An author since childhood, she wrote in poetic language that remains inspiring today, lamenting that the concept of "controlling nature" was a phrase conceived in arrogance at a time when politicians, businessmen and scientists thought that nature existed for the convenience of man. Hopefully, in fits and starts, we are moving away from that concept to an understanding of nature and the environment as important contributors to human well-being to be nourished, protected, and appreciated.

How did your environmental career get started?

PC: It was not really possible to have an environmental consulting career in the 1970s, apart from a few academic and engineering specialties. At first, I worked in an agricultural laboratory setting and later in support of environmental public policy making, until 1980 when it became clear that there would be a demand from the business community for technical assistance in navigating the increasingly complex environmental laws and regulations being written by the federal and state governments. That was the vision of EnSafe. We actually started the company using an unsolicited business plan I had developed for the old SAI for whom I was working in 1979. I proposed a business focusing on hazardous waste consulting for private clients, to be based in Tennessee. That did not match their vision at the time. But that original vision, interpreting public policy and environmental science for our business clients, remains our focus and, it must be admitted, largely the focus of the entire industry which has grown in response to those laws and regulations.

EBJ: How did you know your co-founders Wendell Knight and James Speakman? Was it clear that these were the right people to go into business with?

PC: Wendell Knight was a safety specialist with a particular expertise in hazardous materials management in the aviation industry. We met working on that issue in the early days of Federal Express. He shared my view of the future of environmental consulting but in the context of hazardous materials management. It was a natural fit and HM management remains one of EnSafe's core strengths today. Although Wendell retired on medical leave in 1990, his impact remains in our work today. Jim Speakman was an early pioneer in environmental engineering. He obtained one of the first PhD degrees in environmental engineering (from Vanderbilt) in the country and by 1980 was becoming increasingly interested in hazardous waste sciences as well. He brought the discipline of an engineer to our consulting business and became a national leader in hazardous waste management.

We were also fortunate in those early years to bring on incredible staff, many still with us. Like many of us in those years, they helped define the industry and grow EnSafe in the process, including geologists Paul Stoddard and Ginny Davis, engineer Craig Wise, financial guru Mike Wood, and many others. Founders succeed because of the talents and support of family and staff. We've been fortunate to have both. And there should be a special shout out to my wife, Kay Coop, who had a very successful career working for Federal Express in its early start up years. She signed over her bonus check in 1980 to capitalize EnSafe. I think she would agree the investment has paid off well.

Above: Christmas Eve, 1980s, digging up a contaminated neighborhood in Michigan; Left: Conducting an early HAZWOPER class

EBJ: Looking back, which EnSafe projects stand out for you?

PC: From 1980 to 1989, we were developing a wonderful client base of local and national companies. We enjoyed our clients. They appreciated us. It didn't feel like a business. We were doing our life's work and enjoying it. Then in 1989 we competed for one of the Navy's large environmental contracts and won a $100 million, 10-year CLEAN contract. That changed everything. The challenges of building a business were compounded by the need to meet stringent government contracting rules. Jim Speakman led us through that transition brilliantly. By 1991 we had added a CFO (Mike Wood who is our new Chairman today), built accounting, HR, and contracts departments and begun launching branch offices near our commercial and Navy clients. Today, 33 years later, we continue to provide services to the Navy and very much appreciate their confidence in our work over many decades.

EnSafe was also a very early participant in CERCLA site management. In fact one of the first sites managed under CERCLA (Pre-NPL) was one of ours in Texas. Building investigation and remediation technologies from the ground up starting about 1982 may be our industry's greatest achievement and we are proud to have been part of from the beginning.

EBJ: EnSafe was in business for nine years before opening its second office, and thereafter offices were added at a faster rate with the latest being Pensacola in September 2023. What's the key to successfully opening a new office?

PC: From our first branch office, we decided to operate as a single profit center. That was not common in the 80s and 90s. Most companies in our industry, using a business model common to engineering firms at that time, placed each office on a profit/loss income statement. We felt very strongly that servicing our national client base and applying expertise in a multi-disciplinary model would not work unless the company operated as a whole. We continue that model today although it is becoming more common. Our branches, especially those that come from acquisitions, get up and running faster and more efficiently as a result. Branches can also be opportunistic to support special work. In the early 2000s for instance we had offices in Slovakia, Kazakhstan and China.

We open new offices primarily to be close to clients and their environmental issues. So, they usually begin with a book of business that justifies the office. We have also closed offices on occasions when those projects resolve. Increasingly, we are opening new offices to obtain or retain staff whose expertise is vital and transcends the distance disadvantages.

Management team celebrates Ensafe's 35th Anniversary in 2015.

EBJ: More latterly EnSafe has made acquisitions – What's been your M&A philosophy?

PC: Our initial acquisitions beginning in 2000 were opportunistic but they contributed greatly to our bench strength. More recently we have developed a formal M&A program targeting specific geographies, scientific expertise, or talented staff. Our interest is in smaller companies that can be integrated efficiently. We call it adding a "string of pearls," because without exception the firms have brought talented staff, solid clients and excellent project and business management. Many of our current leadership team members, in fact, came from those acquisitions.

EBJ: When did EnSafe become employee owned? What do you believe motivates your employees?

PC: We describe EnSafe as a "multi-generational employee-owned firm" and have tried to structure ourselves to maintain that vison. We are uncomfortable with the financial engineering that has overtaken our industry, which we find distracting from the job at hand. I am saddened by the disappearance of many of the firms we knew in the 80s and 90s – firms that lost their way due to business, ownership or financial issues. We hope EnSafe can avoid that fate while still, after 43 years, continuing to grow and prosper.

I think our employees appreciate the small company feel that comes from being employee-owned. Decision making is easier as there are fewer levels of management, and employees know there is an open door for communication. But most importantly, we feel that staff who have built our success should share monetarily in that success.

EBJ: Do you have special interests outside of work? Where does the spirit of nature speak most powerfully to you?

PC: If I were not doing environmental work, I'd be a horse trainer. Not only did I grow up riding, training, and starting horses, but my wife and I have traveled the world on horseback. And what better way to experience nature? I suppose hikers must feel the same way. Nature is best enjoyed up close. We'd rather ride 20 miles through a jungle on a horse than walk 20 blocks in big city streets. We've been chased by elephants in Africa, crossed the Andes at 13,000 ft., explored Inca ruins in Peru, trekked down Copper Canyon in Mexico, searched for opals in the Sierra Madres, found Mayan tombs in Belize, and done gourmet restaurants in rural Italy, and more – all on horses. What was it Winston Churchill said? "There's something about the outside of a horse that's good for the inside of a man?"

EBJ: You currently serve as Chairman of the Board and Client Manager, but at 75 you still haven't retired. Why not, and what are you working on now?

PC: Well, I did give up the Chairman role this year making room for a team that is better at administrative management than I ever was. That said, I have rarely contemplated a full retirement, although I have arranged more free time in my schedule. The sense of accomplishment, of service, and of joy that comes from our work is something I would miss terribly. It's also fun and challenging to work with the new generations of environmental scientists that join us – they are so bright, so dedicated, so quick. I also enjoy constantly learning as new technologies and new issues arise to challenge our industry.

Current projects include a very large in-situ thermal remediation project, a large phytoremediation project; a very complex RCRA regulatory issue with significant financial impacts for our client; and moving a former paper mill through the brownfields process.

Above: Phil and Kay in Ecuador
Left: Riding the Mississippi

EBJ: What has it meant to you to be part of this industry?

PC: I have often commented that beginning about 1980, we, and others, virtually invented the environmental consulting industry from scratch. The need developed from a change in federal regulatory structure. In the 1970s, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act were "black box" laws. Talented engineers could design black boxes to put at the end of manufacturing processes to clean up air and water. But the passage of RCRA in 1976 and RCRA regulations in 1980 created a whole new concept. With these regulations, the government was inside the factory with requirements for training, process management, container management, emergency response, and record keeping. Then came CERCLA, creating a new kind of liability that required skills not usually found in the factory. Many of us read the original CERCLA Act in 1982 and realized neither the science nor the technology of the day could meet the aggressive goals it set for remediation.

This change created a demand for multi-disciplinary professionals who know chemistry, engineering, and geology but who also can address business management practices, real estate transfers, legal issues, and liability management. I believe we are virtually unique as an industry in that we can provide expertise that calls upon this muti-disciplinary background. I am frankly proud to have been among the many who built the industry.

EBJ: What person, past or present, would you like to sit next to at dinner and why?

PC: Al Gore, a fellow Tennessean. Not many politicians can successfully maneuver in our technical world to create political change. And it's tough to do so in the face of powerful opposition and even derision. It requires courage and commitment. I would love to understand the motivation behind that commitment. His contribution to the future of the Earth cannot be overstated. Coincidentally, we were at Harvard at the same time but did not cross paths. If I had known he would become a powerful and articulate spokesman for the planet, I would have sought him out and offered my support 50-plus years ago.

EBJ: In a nutshell, what advice would you give to young environmental engineers/scientists just getting started?

PC: It's not a job. It's a career to be lived with passion. You can make a quantifiable contribution to improving our world. What could be a better life for a scientist or engineer?