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Many inspiring influences shaped engineer's success

Some people have one big epiphany that shapes their future. I was fortunate to have a series of big breaks and guardian angels who paved the way for me to become a business owner.

When I was 14, our home on the family tobacco farm in North Carolina caught fire. Mom and I rescued two of my baby brothers, but my 3-year-old brother died and Dad was severely burned. We lost everything. It was devastating, but the thing I remember most is how my parents responded. Heartbroken, of course, but they never complained. Instead, we rebuilt, thanks to \$775 collected in coffee cans around our little town, and the determination to work hard and never give up.

That was the inspiration I needed to succeed. Thanks to my FFA teacher Charles S. Long, I became the first person in my family to go to college. I figured I'd get drafted for the Korean War, but Mr. Long wasn't going to let that happen. I remember his words: "You're not going to be drafted. You're going to North Carolina State University, join ROTC and serve as an officer."

That's what I did. I worked my tail off at school studying mechanical engineering and working odd jobs to get by. Mr. Long told me to get involved in campus activities to develop leadership skills, and I did.

Another guardian angel: K.B. Woods, who accepted me into Purdue University's Civil Engineering School so I could get a master's degree and eventually work on the new interstate highway system. My new wife, Edna, and I hitched our 30-foot house trailer we bought while I was serving at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, and moved to Lafayette.

Perhaps the biggest break came in 1956. Mr. Bob Dickinson visited Purdue to hire someone to do geotechnical consulting as part of his family's business -- Mobile Drilling Co. I was the only student to graduate that year with a master's in geotechnical engineering. He hired me on the spot. My first project: the 35-story City-County Building in Indianapolis.

In 1958, at age 28, Edna and I started our own company, American Testing & Engineering Corp., something that wouldn't have been possible without Mr. Andy Gruber, who was president of a local firm now called Beam Longest and Neff. He invested in our company and helped get more investors to make ATEC possible. By 1991, we had 1,500 employees and 52 offices across the country.

In the 1970s, I decided I needed a hobby. I wasn't inclined to take up golf, so I built an office building. That led to the creation of Mann Properties, where my son, Brian, is now the managing partner.

None of this would be possible without a helpful wife, lots of big breaks and little breaks along the way, the people who guided me, employees who helped us grow and build, and mostly my parents, who instilled in me: "If there's a will, there's a way" and "always look on the brighter side."

--- *By Gerald Mann*