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Small business,

big heart

JACKIE BROWN-HAYSON
visits an award-winning
small business that strives
for excellence but also
shares its failures.

Curly McLeod's desk is empty now. His eight-year battle with cancer ended in early October, but the founder of McLeod Cranes still casts a long shadow over the Mt Maunganui business that was so much more to him than just a job.

Curly – or Ian to those who didn't know him – set up his crane hire business with wife Anne almost 18 years ago. His background was engineering, but one look at the models, toys and pictures of cranes that fill his office makes it clear that this was where his passion lay. Sons Peter and Scott run the business now. They came on board when the cancer was first diagnosed and gradually moved into key roles, although Curly remained involved to the very end.

Scott McLeod: "You can't be a good bastard unless you've made sure everyone is safe when you're working."

New skills

The boys brought with them a wealth of relevant skills. Peter, a professional structural engineer, came to the firm fresh from an overseas role that had seen him planning lifts of up to 14,000 tonnes, while Scott, a computer programmer, had also worked with radios during a stint in the Navy. At McLeod he's responsible for dispatch, technology and OHS, while Peter monitors the technical specifications for jobs, and develops lifting plans for the more challenging ones. Being the boss's boys brought them no special privileges, however. If they were going to work there, Curly told them, they had to drive cranes.

"That's the sort of culture Dad created," Scott says. "He needed to know we understood the fundamentals of the business. He always used to say 'It isn't right unless it's perfect', and that was his attitude to everything he did."

In such a culture, safe work practices become instilled, says Scott. In the early days, as a sole operator with a single crane, accidents were a luxury that Curly simply couldn't afford, so he took care to build a reputation as a safe and reliable operator.

These days the company has a fulltime staff of 26, with 17 cranes of varying sizes and types, and a fleet of other vehicles, including trucks and utes, but the safety focus hasn't diminished. Indeed, Curly was confident enough about his team's performance to emblazon the company vehicles with the proud slogan "Good bastards".

"We measure ourselves against that," Scott says. "You can't be a good bastard unless you've made sure everyone is safe when you're working."

Exhaustive investigations

Perfection in health and safety is hard to come by, however, and it was the company's response to a near-miss incident that most impressed the judges when it won the small business category in the 2012 Safeguard Workplace Health and Safety Awards.

"As a sideline to crane hire, we are contracted to a company that does drilling for the energy industry, and we transport steel casings to their drill sites.

"In December 2011 we were carting a consignment to Taupo on one of our trucks. As it rounded a sweeping right hand corner in

the hills between Te Puke and Rotorua, the load shifted, slewing the truck to the side of the road."

Investigations could not determine the exact sequence of events, but at some point a piece of dunnage had broken – either as the cause or result of the load movement – and the chains securing the load had slackened marginally, allowing the top layer of casings to slide 300-400mm out of position. This was enough to shift the truck's centre of gravity, propelling it half a metre over the grass verge before the driver could bring it to a halt.

In the event no serious harm was done but, Scott says, even a small change in circumstances could have resulted in a horrific crash.

"If the road had been wet, or the corner sharper, the truck would have tipped over for sure. And if the bend had been the other way, it would have gone across the centre line and into opposing traffic."

Guidelines flawed

Early investigations showed everything had been done by the book. Contact Energy – one of two principals overseeing the carting operation – had developed handling procedures for casings, and the load in question had been put on the truck in full compliance with these. Excessive speed and other driving issues were also ruled out, forcing the company to conclude that the existing guidelines for carting such loads were flawed.

What followed was an "enormous" effort – made all the more remarkable by the fact that casing transportation is only a minor part of McLeod's operations – to determine exactly why things had gone wrong, and find a way to prevent future occurrences.

With McLeod's transport manager Ian Monk, Scott made an exhaustive search of all New Zealand guidelines and codes of practice dealing with the transportation of tubular objects. The hunt produced little of real value, however, instead revealing a number of contradictions between the different documents.

"It was confusing, so we turned to the international guidelines for carting casings. With these, however, we found that most had requirements that weren't suited to the conditions on the rig sites that we supply."

New procedures

Eventually Scott and his team located a German document containing some valuable research on the transportation of steel

Jackie Brown-Haysom



Courtesy the McLeod family

The late Curly McLeod and his son Scott at the Safeguard gala awards dinner last year.

pipes. They arranged to have it translated and used a combination of its recommendations and the best material from the local code of practice to draft new safety procedures.

Peter used his engineering skills to determine appropriate specifications for dunnage, bearers, chocks and chains, while Scott's computing background allowed him to swiftly convert the concepts into a document.

"We drew up the first draft then went through picking holes in it, asking ourselves 'what could go wrong?'"

Once the team was satisfied it had a plan that would work for its drivers, consultations began with McLeod's energy industry clients, to ensure the procedures also met their needs. "We got together every three weeks over a period of about four months, until everyone was happy that what we had was both easy to do and safe," Scott says.

"We had to make a few changes along the way, such as finding a way to tie the load on that didn't involve climbing on top, because our principals have restrictions on working at height, but it was really useful to get all the interested parties together because we are all experts in our own particular fields."

This combined input has resulted in a significantly improved process for securing casings, he says. "I think [the procedure] is one of the best in the world in terms of the parameters it sets. Certainly we haven't had any issues with load movement since it went live [in early 2012], and we've been able to apply the same concepts to other tubular items we cart."

He stresses, however, that the procedure is still a working document, and will remain so. It is to be reviewed annually, and the first page of the drivers' handbook describing the revised loading protocols calls for feedback – both positive and negative – to aid further refinement.

Phones for all

Good communication is another of the company's foundation stones. In the early days

Curly was well known for always carrying his mobile, and making a determined effort to answer every call that came in.

His sons, however, have taken this idea further, providing everyone on staff with their own iPhone. As Scott tells it, the idea originated simply as a way to replace an outdated diary-based dispatch system with a new electronic one. However the vWorkApp that was chosen for the phones came with so many extra features, and proved so easy to use, that it quickly became a key part of day-to-day operations.

For a small company the investment was huge, and Scott admits that even Curly took some convincing at first. "I don't think we told him initially that we were going to buy the phones outright. Back in 2010 it cost us \$20,000 to get 20 3GS phones, but when we upgraded to iPhone 4s later on, we were able to sell the original ones for a profit."

The brothers expected a few teething troubles with the new technology, but were delighted with the alacrity with which it was adopted.

"We gave everyone 30 or 40 minutes training with the new phones, then sent them away to try them out for themselves. We'd planned a second training session for later on, but we ended up cancelling it because everyone was coming and showing us how to do things!"

Complete package

At the most basic level the phones provide everyone with portable access to basic business tools – emails, maps, a calendar, and a diary – but they have also proved an easy solution to a significant health and safety headache. "Now when we dispatch someone to a job we can provide them with all the site- and customer-specific safety information they need. This is a really big thing when you have 17 cranes on the road, and each driver may visit up to four sites a day, every one of which will have different safety requirements."

The phones also provide ready access

to documentation of all sorts, from first aid certificates and vehicle maintenance records, to codes of practice and maps locating underground services. And if things go wrong, not only can a driver immediately notify all stakeholders, but he also has the option of using photos or videos to provide extra information.

"This function was very useful when we had the truck incident. We were able to inform our principals immediately, and give them access to all the information that we had."

Full disclosure

Such openness about workplace accidents is not something you will find in every organisation, but for Curly incidents were opportunities to learn, and he believed it was important to share what he learnt with others who were facing the same risks.

"We have a very open relationship with our clients – warts and all," Scott says.

When, about a decade ago, Curly questioned a crane manufacturer about the proximity of brake and accelerator pedals after a crane he was driving went off a wharf into the sea, other drivers began to come forward, describing similar incidents relating to the same design issue.

More recently another initiative designed to turn mishaps into learning experiences has seen cameras wired to the overload switches on all McLeod cranes. Whenever a driver activates this switch, which allows the crane to lift beyond its intended capacity in an emergency, the camera provides a visual record. Subsequent analysis of this footage allows the company to identify the types of scenarios where the overload is being used, and to determine whether there are better options available.

Welcome recognition

Curly's death brought a sad end to what had otherwise been a year of great success for the company. Only weeks after winning the Safeguard award, Scott won the Crane Association of New Zealand's Weigh Load trophy, for his work on the association's website and for writing a series of operator toolbox talks. He is delighted his dad was well enough to share in both these big events

"It meant a great deal to him when we won the Safeguard award. We're only a small business, but it was always important to him that we shared what we learnt from anything that went wrong, because that's the way to make our industry safer, and that's something that was really important to him."

No doubt Curly's influence will live on at McLeod Cranes, but there is also no doubt that his passing has left a large gap in the wider industry. As the obituary on the company website put it, he was a bloody good bastard. 