

Scholarship recipient inherits dad's passion for building bridges

Lee Timmons is studying civil engineering to pursue a career in the family field

By Shandra Martinez for ATSSA



Top: Lee Timmons is pictured with his dad, Ricky, at Christmas time in 2000 before his father's injury on the job.

Bottom: Ricky Timmons suffered a life-threatening injury on a roadway work site in 2004 that left his legs paralyzed. Lee was three months shy of his fourth birthday at the time.

There might be something in Lee Timmons' DNA that pulls him toward road and bridge construction.

His grandfather worked in bridge construction jobs for 40 years, and his dad, Ricky, followed in those footsteps until a freak accident on the job left him paralyzed.

Lee is grateful to The American Traffic Safety Services Foundation (The ATSS Foundation) for the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship that's helping him pursue his dream of building bridges.

Options for the future

Lee, 20, is studying civil engineering at Trine University in northern Indiana. He's still figuring out

if he wants to go into design, inspection or another aspect of bridge-building, such as working as an in-house engineer for a construction crew.

"I had a summer internship where I was actually working on a bridge, doing a little bit of construction," he said. "You really get to appreciate what goes into building one and what has to be done to make it last for hundreds of years, hopefully."

Conversations about bridges were part of Lee's childhood because so many family members worked in the industry. In addition to his paternal grandfather Jimmie Timmons' long career in bridge and road building, his maternal grandfather, Terry Keen, worked as an oiler on road construction. His uncle, Dave Keen, began his career doing bridgework and now works as a big machine operator for a family-owned road construction business.

Lee thinks the attraction to bridge and road work for his family is the combination of working outside while building something, often with heavy equipment.

Growing up, he spent time building things in the garage with his dad.

"My dad has a knack for wood-working and that helped with being out there with him. You could visualize stuff and know how to put things together," Lee said.

Dad's severe injury

Lee was 3 1/2 years old when his dad was severely injured on the

job on March 30, 2004. Ricky Timmons, a heavy highway carpenter at the time, was a pile driver for a bridge over Highway 17 in Plymouth, Ind.

Ricky was standing in a hole, measuring the piling, when the 50-pound corner of the hammerhead on the crane broke off, falling 35 feet and striking him on the head. He was in the hospital for three months. The injury left him without the use of his legs.

"One of the stories that I remember hearing from the doctor, that there was no reason for him to be alive—only God left him alive—for me and my brother Joel, who was born two weeks to the day after the accident," Lee said.

Ricky, then 36, had been working on bridges for 14 years.

"It was just one of those things where they say it shouldn't break or will never break," Ricky said. "My dad said he worked in bridge construction for 40 years and he had never seen a bonnet break," explaining that the bonnet is the bottom part of a hammer that keeps everything together underneath the piston when it's driving.

Positivity and retraining

With the severity of the injury, Ricky's doctor told him there were only three outcomes: death, quadriplegia and paraplegia.

"I definitely got the better of the three. I've still got the use of my arms and hands," he said.

After the accident, workers' compensation paid for his retraining. He picked an

architecture degree because of his construction experience and earned a master's degree at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Mich.

When he graduated in 2012, most of the openings available were for a licensed architect. After completing a master's degree, graduates still need to go through a series of tests, usually done as part of an intern development program. Because of limited opportunities where he lives, Ricky couldn't find a company to sponsor his final stage.

He ended up volunteering as a mechanical, plumbing and electrical engineer for about three years to stay up-to-date on industry software. This year, he's been sidelined as he awaits shoulder surgery.

In the meantime, Lee's mother, Jen, earned an accounting degree and works as an accountant in nearby South Bend, Ind.

Grateful for a scholarship

Because finances have been tight, the family was happy when Jen found the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship opportunity. Last spring, Lee was one of 14 students awarded a scholarship for the 2020-21 academic year.

The competitive scholarship program offers up to \$10,000 annually for dependents of roadway workers killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents. Students who demonstrate a strong commitment to volunteerism are eligible to apply for an additional \$1,000, given in honor of Chuck Bailey, a roadway safety member who died in 2002.

"I think it's great because you get somebody in my situation, where you know it's tough to make ends meet. I think it's a great opportunity to help people that really need it," Ricky said.



Lee Timmons celebrates his graduation from LaPorte High School in LaPorte, Ind., in June 2018 with his younger brother Joel, left, mother Jen, and father, Ricky.

Ricky is grateful there are organizations like The ATSS Foundation that honor the sacrifice of roadway workers who have been killed or severely injured on the job by supporting their dependents.

The scholarship helped Lee afford private college. Trine is a good fit because of its small size. The civil engineering program is a close-knit group and so is the college's baseball team, for which he is a pitcher. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, the team's season was cut short in 2020 and it's unclear how it will impact this year's schedule.

Favorite bridge

Lee grew up in a rural area of LaPorte County, about 20 minutes west of South Bend and an hour's drive east of Chicago.

His favorite bridge is the Chicago Skyway, a 7.8-mile-long toll road that connects the Indiana Toll Road to the Dan Ryan Expressway on Chicago's South Side. The main feature of the Skyway is a half-mile steel truss bridge, known as the "High Bridge."

"When you are standing on the bridge, you can feel a semi bouncing the whole bridge. It's scary and cool to me all at the same time," Lee said.

Ricky is proud that Lee knows what he wants.

"I hope he enjoys it as much as I did. I tell my sons, as far as bridgework and bridge carpentry, it's probably one of the hardest jobs out there, but I loved it," he said. "If you love your job, you never go to work." ///

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