

John Cameron: Engineering The Road to Success

BY WARREN STRUGATCH - MARCH 19, 2018



John Cameron of Cameron Engineering is as comfortable in a business suit as he is in a wetsuit. (Photo by Bob Giglione)

56

After graduating from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point with a Bachelor's degree in engineering, John Cameron worked as a field engineer for Westinghouse Electric at the Indian Point Nuclear Plant, then for the Nassau County Department of Health. Nights he took graduate classes in environmental science at LIU Post. In 1985, he founded Cameron Engineering & Associates, LLP, growing it into one of Long Island's foremost consulting engineering and planning firms, handling many of the region's major construction, expansion and renovation projects. For 10 years John has chaired the influential Long Island Regional Planning Council. Active in leadership roles at numerous educational, charitable and environmental organizations, Cameron serves on the boards of the engineering schools of both Hofstra and Stony Brook universities and the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County. A one-time college track and field star, he is also a lifelong runner, surfer and fitness enthusiast. Raised in Long Beach, he and his wife Loretta live in Rockville Centre. Here are excerpts from our conversation.

Warren Strugatch: Who were the major influences in your life?

John Cameron: My parents were tremendous influences. My father, John, came to America from Scotland through Ellis Island. My mother, Florence, came from a Catholic family in Scotland. In those days it was difficult to practice Catholicism there, so she talked my grandfather into coming to America. My dad was the most Christian person I have ever known and my moral compass: Right was right, wrong was wrong, you don't blur the lines. For years on Long Island he worked two jobs, as a school bus driver and as a carpenter. We moved out to Nevada where he worked as a carpenter in the copper mines, as a janitor, as a bartender and at a bowling alley. My mom got homesick so we moved back. She was a huge sports fan. My father and my mother raised four kids and taught us the value of hard work.

WS: How did you decide to start your own business?

JC: Growing up I didn't know anyone who had their own business, so I didn't necessarily think of starting my own. I started working for other people. Engineering is a very conservative profession, by its nature. I wanted to innovate and I knew I had to do this on my own. I started my own firm in 1985 with \$5,000 in the bank and no clients — the most difficult thing I ever did. A year later everything burned down. I had to start again. Nietzsche said whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

WS: Did it make you stronger?

JC: Definitely. I started different businesses and did different things: general construction, recycling, design. We started getting contracts around the country. People who worked for us stay on. My first part-time assistant still works here.

WS: What's the most important project you've worked on?

JC: I'd say it's the Long Beach Waterfront Park in '97. I grew up down the block. It was named Project of the Year for Long Island by the Professional Engineers Society of New York. There's a plaque there dedicated to my parents.

WS: Engineers are famous for being cerebral. What are you passionate about?

JC: I'm passionate about Long Island, what our challenges are and what we have to do to resolve them. Resistance to change is one of our biggest impediments, along with cost of living, cost of government, legacy cost, and cost of (public employee) pensions.

WS: You've spent a decade as chairman of the Long Island Regional Planning Board. How has that affected you?

JC: I deal with a great deal of cynicism. Many people experience not having a voice in how things are done. They react by becoming resistant to change. That resistance impedes progress. We need affordable housing here. We also need more rental housing. These have become four-letter words. Where are working class people supposed to live? Where are poor people supposed to live? They have to live somewhere. They should be able to live in safety and have decent schools too.

Cameron Engineering & Associates, LLP

Managing director: John Cameron

Location: Woodbury, NY

Description: Consulting engineering and planning firm

Founded: 1985

Employees: 100

Work force: engineers, landscape architects, planners, facility operators and environmental scientists

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