JAMES J. O’BRIEN
1929–2020
Elected in 2012

“For development of standards of practice for computerized scheduling of construction projects and capital programs.”

BY LILLIAN C. BORRONE


Jim was born to Sylvester Jerome and Emma Belle Filer O’Brien in Philadelphia on October 20, 1929. He was proud of his Irish heritage and a go-getter. When he enrolled at Cornell University in a 5-year engineering course in 1948, he realized that, while he was fortunate to be there, he needed a job. He waited tables at one of the fraternity houses and decades later noted that it gave him the opportunity to follow “Big Red” football passionately as the fraternity president was close friends with key team members. He also joined NROTC to assist with his financial situation.

Jim graduated from Cornell with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering in 1952. It was a momentous year for him as he also married Carmen Heister that June. Shortly after marrying he began his service in the United States Navy, serving during the Korean War. He and Carmen also began their family with their first child, Jessica, born in December of 1953. They subsequently added two more children, Michael and David.
Jim’s first engineering job was with Rohm & Haas as a project engineer (1955–59). While there he began to focus on project management and also did some postgraduate study at the University of Houston.

In 1959 he accepted a project engineer position with the Radio Corporation of America, where he served on project installations in New Jersey, Greenland, and Alaska through 1962. That year he returned to the Philadelphia area and went to work for John Mauchly (NAE 1967), one of the pioneers of the computer field who, with J. Presper Eckert (NAE 1967), created the ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer).

With his project management experience and an interest in the critical path method (CPM) of contract scheduling, Jim now worked with a mentor who both supported his interests and had developed a computing device that offered the capacity to introduce CPM more broadly to the engineering community. Jim worked with Mauchly & Associates until 1965, when he founded and became senior vice president of Meridian Engineering Company of Philadelphia with Fred Kreitzberg.

Licensed in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey, Jim then served as president of Molecular Delivery Corporation (1968–72) in Cherry Hill, NJ, before establishing the consulting firm of James J. O’Brien, PE (1972–77). Both served as platforms for him to promote the CPM concept.

CPM was used as the basis of a management information system to support the US Army Corps of Engineers in the construction of the vertical assembly building (VAB) for the Saturn rocket program at Cape Canaveral, Florida, in the mid-1960s.1 Its success led to NASA’s choosing Meridian Engineering and their team to develop a similar system for all aspects of the Apollo space travel program.

In 1968 O’Brien led a team to apply “the Cape Canaveral approach” to New York City’s capital program, which had

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1 As reported in a profile published in Engineering News Record (May 26, 2003), “Off the Critical Path? Experts Debate the State of CPM Scheduling.”
a $4 billion public works backlog and needed to expedite projects to the bid stage.

During the 1970s O’Brien-Kreitzberg & Associates, founded in 1972, evolved into a well-known consulting firm with a team monitoring 2500 projects. Jim served as president of the firm (1977–80), CEO (1980–89), and then chair, from 1993 until the firm was acquired by URS in 1997.

In 1988 the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey brought in the O’Brien-Kreitzberg team to help expedite, organize, and manage its $2 billion John F. Kennedy International Airport 2000 renewal program. Among other responsibilities, the contract called for O’Brien-Kreitzberg to introduce and educate the Port Authority Engineering Department staff about the use of CPM, which it did with great effect. The PA staff became proponents of the scheduling approach and later adopted other strategies promoted by Jim O’Brien, including formalized project management and value engineering.

Eager to put out the word about the critical path method, he published the first textbook on the subject, *CPM in Construction Management: Scheduling by the Critical Path Method* (McGraw-Hill, 1965). It became a bestseller and a staple of academic study, and is now in its eighth edition. He also wrote or coauthored eleven other books.

In addition to his professional career, Jim was very engaged in engineering organizations. He was a cofounder of the Project Management Institute (elected a fellow in 1989) and Society for the Advancement of Value Engineering; and he was very active with the Lawrence D. Miles Value Foundation, for which he served 6 years as director of the board and 19 years as a trustee; Construction Management Association of America (elected a fellow in 1993); American Society of Civil Engineers (elected a fellow in 1996); and Project Management Association of America.

In addition to his election to the NAE, he was recognized with the Professional Manager Award from the NY Chapter of the Society for the Advancement of Management in 1969.

However one defines success, it is clear that Jim O’Brien was one. He leveraged his knowledge and experience in
unique fashion using his management experience to contribute to the growth of a new industry and new applications to educate practitioners and enhance the practice of engineering.

He and Carmen divorced in 1984 and later that year he married Rita F. Gibson, who eventually became executive vice president of O’Brien-Kreitzberg. She had two children, Susan Mathers (William) and Stephen Gibson (deceased). Rita died in November 2010. Jim is survived by his children Jessica Snyder (Marc), Michael O’Brien (Victoria), and David O’Brien (Pamela); four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren; and Rita’s daughter and grandchildren.