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HOOKED FROM THE START, HUMBLED TO SERVE

AFS President Dave Gilson reflects on what drew him into active engagement with the association and what he's passionate about today as he takes hold of the leadership helm this year.

KIM PHELAN

CastExpo marked the official beginning of Dave Gilson's one-year term as AFS President. While he, his fellow Executive Committee leaders, and the Board of Directors roll up their collective sleeves to work on key priorities in the next 12 months, Gilson is personally tasking himself with two intertwined missions—first, representing the best interest of all AFS Corporate and Individual Members and second, further advancing and activating the association's three pillars: advocate, educate, and innovate.

Based in Brookfield, Wisconsin, Gilson is the sales & marketing director at SinterCast, whose technical center is based in Katrineholm, Sweden. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin Madison, holding a metallurgical engineering degree, he has been an AFS Member for 35 years. Co-author of three consecutive Silver Anniversary Papers as well as numerous other technical papers, Gilson began his volunteer service 14 years ago on the Cast Iron Research Committee, of which he eventually became Chair. In 2018, he joined

the Board for a four-year term, and in 2023 he accepted an invitation to join the Executive Committee, where he has served as Second and First Vice President.

A leader with decades of international management experience, Gilson, at heart, is a problem-solver and vision-caster who is always thinking about how to shape and improve the future. One February morning, he dialed in for a dialog with *Modern Casting* Editor Kim Phelan to talk about his interconnected lives as industry professional and association volunteer.

MODERN CASTING: *Tell me what a day in the life of David Gilson looks like.*

DAVE GILSON: It starts very early! Whether I'm working in my home office or traveling, I spend a lot of time talking to people in Europe in the mornings, and then in the evenings I am often calling Asia. At any given time, I'm either visiting customers or original equipment manufacturers.

I love working for SinterCast. We provide technology to foundries that enables them to produce compacted graphite iron, which is known as CGI. I get to work with foundries, but more importantly, I frequently work with OEMs to help their engineering teams understand why they should specify CGI. There are many different avenues and tasks with my job and I enjoy all of it—but it can be a long day, to be honest.

MC: *What's the best kept secret of SinterCast? What do people ask about the most?*

DG: It's funny—the minute people see SinterCast, they think sintered metal, but we don't have anything to do with that. The name stems from one of our founders who was a specialist in sintering, but it was the casting technology that prevailed. What we do is provide equipment, consumables, software, and engineering service to foundries to consistently and accurately produce CGI for series production. CGI is used in situations where you need simultaneous thermal and mechanical loading—it's the thermal properties of gray iron but with higher strengths.

MC: *What kind of challenges do you help metalcasters solve?*

DG: Our customers really need us to produce high quality, consistent CGI, and our engineers are always working with them to improve their operations. I usually work with the foundries on the front end to complete the sale of our equipment, and I'm always looking to work with OEM engineers to solve their questions and get the right information on material properties.

MC: *What do you especially love about this industry?*

DG: The foundry industry is very close knit. People from different backgrounds, nationalities, skill sets, and experience will go out of their way to help a fellow foundry person solve a problem. I left the industry for a few years to work for a power transmission company. When I returned to the foundry industry with SinterCast, it was like I never left—I was warmly welcomed back by former colleagues and friends.

MC: *From your perspective as a supplier, what is the great value proposition of AFS membership?*

DG: AFS provides a great opportunity to highlight your products and showcase your company. When you're an active member, you can work alongside many of the foundry personnel who are your prospective customers, whether it's on national committees or local chapters. You develop lasting relationships with these foundry individuals, and it's just invaluable for your organization. Very rarely do you need to make cold calls, because you know most of the people in the industry, and if you're really active on the committees or chapters, people know you, and that is a great door-opener.

In a foundry, you don't change suppliers overnight or grab every new product that comes along from a supplier. A lot of foundries have a wait-and-see mindset. 'We're not going to be the first.' But you need to build rapport with people, and then they'll trust you and listen to your advice. The other thing about working with AFS and the committees and chapters is that people like to help each other solve problems. If they've seen you work with AFS to solve problems, that just goes a long way toward building the level of trust.

MC: *What was your catalyst for getting involved with AFS?*

DG: I started my career in the foundry at Motor Castings right out of UW Madison. I went to the AFS Wisconsin

Regional at the Pfister Hotel, and I was just blown away. It was an amazing venue, and the attendance was great. I met all these industry icons, and I was just impressed by the sharing of technology, the technical presentations, and all the discussions—even just the conversations in the hallways. I was just hooked.

After that, I went to business school and then went to work for Ashland Chemical, now known as ASK Chemical. We strongly believed in AFS participation at the national level, especially through technical committees and technical papers. We kind of had a mandate: You had to write a certain number of papers every one or two years. That gave me many opportunities for collaboration, and I co-authored a number of papers with people in the industry. It still amazes me that three of those papers I co-authored many years ago were actually chosen as Silver Anniversary papers—actually three years in a row, which was really cool.

MC: *When did your serious volunteerism kick in?*

DG: When I went to work for SinterCast in 2011, I immediately recognized that AFS would be an avenue to get involved in the cast iron community, so I joined the Cast Iron Research Committee and eventually moved up to be the committee chair. That has been an ongoing opportunity to meet and interact with cast iron experts as well as new people entering the industry. People's roles are always changing and new grads and new individuals are always coming into the industry, but when you're involved in a committee you get to keep abreast of contacts and new initiatives.

Later on, I started having conversations with a few people about joining the national AFS Board of Directors, and that appealed to me from a management perspective—being able to use some of my skills and global knowledge to help AFS. And it's been a great experience. You get to meet more of the executives within



At the 2024 Foundry Leadership Summit, Gilson, left, posed with foursome friends, Mike Grubich, LAK Group; Brett Fisher, Foundry Solutions & Design; and Brad Muller, Charlotte Pipe.

our industry, who are really dedicated, accomplished individuals.

MC: *Where would we see your fingerprints—things you've had particular influence on—during your volunteer tenure with AFS?*

DG: On the Cast Iron Research Committee, we as a group initiated more connection with the FEF universities, introducing ourselves to students and recognizing the value in having universities do research for us instead of ad hoc organizations. So, we have been more intentional about soliciting them to do research based on the ideas brought forth from the committee.

In terms of the national level, it's still a work in progress. AFS is extremely well run under Doug, and I'm really impressed by the entire AFS team. I'm excited to work with the diverse and very accomplished individuals on the Board.

We're looking for new opportunities and methods to promote and advocate on behalf of AFS. You only need to look at the February issue of *Modern Casting* to see that safety is a huge priority for AFS and the industry as a whole—we're trying to really keep that on the forefront of what we discuss.

The other thing we're looking at is training and what the industry will look like in 5–10 years in terms of what methods and tools we'll be using. A taskforce has been created to work

alongside Doug and Jen Christian to look at a clean-sheet design, whether it's AI related or enhanced virtual training and more. We have a sizeable endowment at the Cast Metals Institute, and it's time to use that to really enhance how we go about teaching the industry, from safety to technical issues to marketing and sales. Hopefully this taskforce is going to provide a lot of beneficial insight to create a great learning atmosphere.

MC: *Are there some key issues coming up that you're going to be wrestling with as a Board?*

DG: I look at the three words in the AFS logo: Advocate, educate, and innovate. We're looking at all three.

With advocacy among our Members of Congress, it's never ending. Stephanie Salmon and Jeff Hannapel do great work at the front, and we as a Board do everything we can to support them. Also, the Fly-In in Washington, D.C., is an important event where all AFS members have a role to play both in learning about the issues and advocating among their representatives and senators.

Then on the education side, I'm really excited about this taskforce helping to take us to the next level.

And innovate—that goes back to the technical committees, and we're always looking for active participation. That's a tough one. People belong to committees, but it really

is tough to get a lot of active participants, so we're going to keep trying to hammer that theme.

This means taking on roles like Secretary and then Chair, or maybe stepping up to the plate to be a member of a research steering committee of a certain project or helping to plan some of the AFS conferences. It takes a lot of time, and the more you can spread the work around, the easier it is on everyone. You can also participate as a speaker or a panelist, and you can promote these events among the younger people of our industry.

MC: *If you were standing on the proverbial mountaintop looking across our industry, what do you think lies ahead?*

DG: My personal opinion is that AI is going to change the landscape of manufacturing. As we go forward, we're going to become so much more productive.

There are many variables in the foundry that affect scrap rates and production, and I think the more we incorporate AI into our daily routines, the better we're going to be as a manufacturing industry. The challenge is on payback. You can spend a lot of money introducing different forms of AI you have to find the return.

MC: *What are you looking forward to as president?*

DG: First off, I'd like to say it's a humbling experience to be the AFS president, given that so many industry icons have served in this role. It's really an honor to serve.

I'm looking forward to working with Doug, the AFS staff, and our Board of Directors. I'm really pumped on what our board will be this year—there's some great expertise and great industry knowledge there.

As a board, we're going to continue to put the interests of members at the forefront of all of our discussions and decisions. To me, that is what the board is there to do—represent our members by making the right decisions and guiding AFS in the right way. I'm really looking forward to a great year. **MC**