A LOVE OF **LEARNING**

Robert Barss dedicated to providing tools, education to support CHES members' success

Robert Barss is a name few people, if any, don't know in the field of healthcare engineering, at least in Canada. A long-time member of the Canadian Healthcare Engineering Society (CHES) who has taken on numerous leadership roles at both the local and national levels over the past 18 years, it is not unexpected that Barss was chosen as this year's recipient of the Hans Burgers Award for Outstanding Contribution to Healthcare Engineering by his CHES peers, though he did not anticipate the recognition himself.

"I was both surprised and honoured when informed," says Barss. "There are many individuals within the CHES family that are deserving and I am humbled to have been the one selected."

▲ Robert Barss joined by his wife, Peggy, and son, Joey, with daughter-in-law, Lee (left), as well as daughter, Karen, and son-in-law, Matt (right). Noticeably absent is his son, Andrew, and daughter-in-law, Allison, who were unable to attend the award presentation as they just welcomed Robert's sixth grandchild.

Barss joins a long list of award winners that includes Phil Langford, who introduced him to the organization in 2003. At that time, Barss had just been hired as project manager for the construction of the Women's and Children's Wellness Centre at South Shore Regional Hospital in Bridgewater, N.S. — his first job in the healthcare sector. Prior to this, he worked as an electrical technician at the Department of National Defence where he repaired and retrofitted submarines, naval destroyers and land-based facilities, and then as senior supervisor of operations and maintenance for the country's largest fish processing company, National Sea Products, which later changed its name to High Liner Foods. It was here that Barss was approached about the role with the local health authority that involved overseeing a renovation at the hospital, including the creation of an airborne isolation room/wing, paediatric in-patient unit, obstetric clinic, and sleep therapy and chemotherapy departments, with the prospect of taking over for the retiring facility manager upon project completion.

"After much deliberation, I made the change and haven't looked back," says Barss.

Moving from the food industry to healthcare presented its share of challenges. But given many of the maintenance and operations concepts are similar and the then-South Shore Regional Health Authority (the province's nine district health authorities have since merged to form Nova Scotia Health) sponsored Barss for numerous education programs to assist with his growth, the transition was relatively seamless. It was made even more so with the help of CHES.

"I was quick to realize the value the organization provided to its members, especially the professional development for facilities staff to ensure their knowledge of the healthcare environment is current with the many changing standards, codes and best practices," says Barss.

He also came to understand and appreciate the countless hours CHES's leadership team and other volunteers put into providing the tools that the organization's membership needs to be successful, as well as the difficulty volunteer organizations have with recruiting and maintaining support. Wanting to make a positive difference and contribute to the development of CHES, Barss joined the national board first as secretary and then treasurer, and got involved with various committees, including those dedicated to

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professional development, conference planning and healthcare standards. In 2015, he took a more active role at the local level, serving as CHES Maritime chair until 2017. Over this two-year period, the chapter's finances increased to $43,000 from $12,000, its annual conference and trade show was opened up to general maintenance staff and an associate member was added to the executive team. CHES Maritime also won its first President's award in 2015 under his leadership, an honour it has been bestowed twice since, in both 2019 and 2020, making it one of just two chapters to achieve such a feat.

"A small chapter winning this award shows the dedication of the executive and its members," says Barss, who is presently vice-chair, a role he has held since 2017.

Of all his CHES-related accomplishments, Barss is most proud of his role in the development of the Canadian Certified Healthcare Facility Manager (CCHFM) designation, though many consider him the driving force behind its creation. The first-of-its-kind certification program is loosely modelled after the American Society for Healthcare Engineering's Certified Healthcare Facility Manager designation, which he and only three other CHES members (Michael McRitchie, George Pankiw and Gordon Burrill) had obtained at that time. The foursome formed an advisory panel and led by Barss, investigated, collaborated and planned to bring the program to fruition. That goal was met in June 2015, with its launch.

"Certification demonstrates a facility manager has obtained the necessary education and experience to qualify as an elite professional in their field," says Barss.

The CCHFM program is designed to test a well-defined body of knowledge representative of professional practice in healthcare facilities management in Canada. The exam is composed of 100 multiple choice questions that cover five broad topics, each weighted differently: compliance (25 per cent); planning, design and construction (18 per cent); maintenance and operations (28 per cent); finance (15 per cent); and administration (14 per cent). It can be taken at one of 14 testing centres located across the country or through an online proctoring service. A minimum grade of 70 per cent is required to pass.

To maintain the hard-earned credential, CCHFM certificate holders must either successfully pass the exam again prior to the designation's three-year expiration date or complete 45 contact hours of continuing professional education (CPE). Eligible CPE activities include attending or teaching academic courses, completing online courses and partaking in professional organization conferences.

So far, a total of 13 CHES members have obtained the designation.

"With time, we anticipate certification will become standard practice across the country as it provides a level of comfort to patients, families and hospital staff to know the buildings where they heal, visit and work are overseen by proven, competent individuals," says Barss, who acknowledges he has a personal stake in the program's success and would like to see it continue to grow and become a thriving part of the CHES structure.

In terms of professional achievements, the Hans Burgers award ranks at the top of a long list as the most "satisfying experience," says Barss. Others include introducing technological advancements, such as a patient wandering and child abduction system to hospitals on the south shore of Nova Scotia, the first in the Maritimes.

Within two years of accepting his first job as project manager with the South Shore District Health Authority (2003-2005), Barss moved on to become manager of plant and support services (2005-2009). From there, he became director of engineering and facilities management (2009-2016) and finally manager of environmental stewardship and accountability for Nova Scotia Health, a position he still holds to this day.

During his career, he has championed and developed energy conservation initiatives and programs, and educated staff on various recycling and waste reduction strategies. Presently, he is working with MCW Consultants Ltd. and EfficiencyOne on finalizing a series of energy audits of regional, tertiary and community hospitals. An energy master plan that he has overseen for the health authority is also nearing completion.

"Knowing that the work we accomplish will not only improve efficiencies with the facilities but will also contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases and a better future for the next generations gives me great satisfaction," he says.

When not busy at work and with CHES, both of which bring him great joy, Barss relishes a simple life in the community he grew up in, Rose Bay, with his wife and high school sweetheart, Peggy. He enjoys spending time with his three kids and their families, especially his six active grandchildren, and going to his camp, Dar morza (Polish for gift of the sea) — a fisherman's shack at his late parents' summer home on Bells Cove. A boat lover himself, fishing and cruising amongst the islands off the Lahave River are also favourite pastimes, as is beekeeping at home where he has a small apiary and tending to his gardens, though he wouldn't call the latter a hobby.

"It's more of a frustrating exercise in keeping the deer population fed," he laughs. ■