

# LeRoy Troyer

## Builder 'Drafts' Well-Rounded Life

By Matt Ottinger

"You know the Dos Equis man? The 'Most Interesting Man in the World?' To me, he's just that – because of the things he's done."

Luke Troyer reflects on the legacy of his grandfather, LeRoy, with a clear abundance of pride and amazement. Luke serves as director of business development for the design, architecture, engineering and construction firm Troyer Group, which LeRoy founded in 1971.

"I saw his car backing out of the driveway all throughout my childhood. I was always interested in what he had going on ..." Luke recalls. "He's always doing the most. He's turning 79 tomorrow (at the time of this November interview), and he's in Hawaii taking a much-needed break, because he still works 70 hours a week, easily. It's just his passion to do what he does."

I call LeRoy, eager to discuss his life and times. He offers a warm greeting, shuts the door to his vacation domicile in Maui so the ocean sounds don't interfere with our call – and proceeds to ask me about myself.

But selflessness is a virtue common among those who grew up in the Amish communities of Elkhart County. Raised on a farm near Middlebury, the industriousness of his culture also piqued his interest in construction.

"As a young boy, when there were barn fires or tornados, my father would help rebuild barns and I'd go along," LeRoy reflects. "That's when you didn't have all the laws you do today. I worked in construction at a young age. In fourth grade, we had a teacher who taught careers. She would have me go to the principal's office to get



LeRoy Troyer's life has been about building. That includes relationships, like his friendship with former President Jimmy Carter – shown with country music stars Trisha Yearwood and Garth Brooks and Carter's wife Rosalynn – on site in Memphis in 2016 during the Jimmy Carter Work Project.

the blueprints of the building we were in. I went and brought them back, and she explained what architects did. I said, 'That's what I want to do.'

He adds that when he was 16, he began tracing architects' drawings to learn the craft of drafting.

"We used pencils and erasers, then came along the plotters," he notes. "Now it's on computers. It has wonderful attributes, but limitations from a creative standpoint. ... Now in construction, the trend is that supposedly in the future we'll do 3D printing for buildings."

### An Irish tale

The "luck of the Irish" is sometimes attributed to the University of Notre Dame football team – at least in its more prosperous seasons. It wasn't luck, but determination and perseverance that earned LeRoy acceptance into the university in the most non-traditional fashion in the late 1960s. While the university welcomes many newcomers each year, LeRoy holds the distinction of having been 28 years old, lacking a high school diploma and supporting a family at the time of his acceptance. (He also studied abroad in Rome for a year during his tenure at Notre Dame.)

"I had almost a 'Rudy' story getting into Notre Dame, getting in without (a full high school education)," he reveals. "But some people gave me some opportunities. I had a family – three sons when I went to Notre Dame and was 33 when I graduated."

LeRoy worked for an architect who designed religious facilities throughout the country.

"I used to be in charge of his office and was a project manager. He didn't want to have a partner, so I decided to have my own firm. I started by myself. One of the things I enjoyed was working with people to help build."

After having a practice for five years or so, LeRoy determined he could tithe 10% of his time for charitable endeavors.

### Building a better world for all

LeRoy's world view spanned far beyond Northern Indiana, even when he was in college. During that time, he became involved internationally. In 1968, he organized the First International Youth Conference on the Human Environment, with support from the United Nations, various governments, organizations and businesses. In fact, he was the Secretary General of the Conference.

The 1971 conference was held in Canada and 75 countries were represented at the 10-day event. LeRoy also attended the United Nations Conference on Housing in 1970, and he met with top officials in Richard Nixon's White House in the process.

"I've had the privilege of professionally serving developing countries and serving on international boards for economic development. What I've learned from developing countries is that the issues they have are similar to the plight of our inner cities today."

His passion for housing and assisting the underprivileged led him to Habitat for Humanity decades ago, and he ultimately found himself once again in presidential company.

"I met President (Jimmy) Carter in 1985. We struck up a friendship and that developed into the (annual one week Habitat for Humanity Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Work Projects program)," he relays. "We started in Chicago in 1986 and have traveled to all continents except Antarctica."

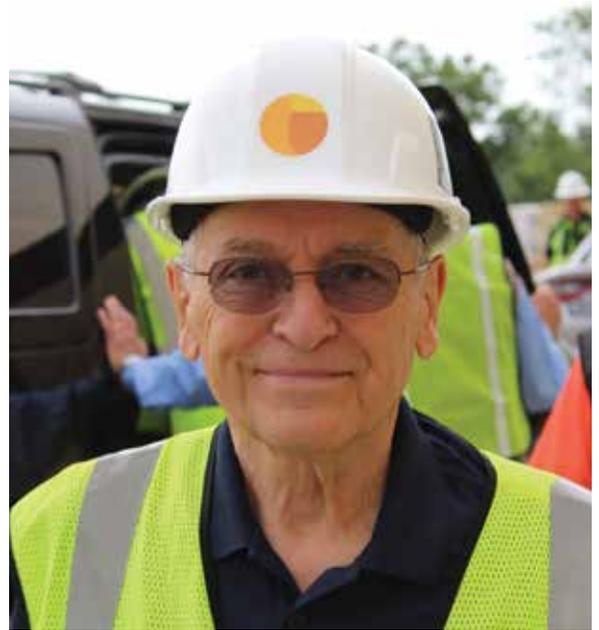
LeRoy has served as a leader on these annual projects, which have combatted poverty in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Thailand, the Philippines and more. The 2016 project took the team to Memphis, Tennessee.

"I have a lot of respect for (Carter)," LeRoy conveys. "He's 91, and he and Rosalynn were still pounding nails last August. Next year we'll be in Canada and in the following years we'll see if he will come to Indiana."

Habitat's mission remains near and dear to LeRoy.

"Sweat equity is the down payment. That's why the houses are affordable. People come together to build it, like a barn building in the Amish community."

Above all, his philanthropic efforts and his professional work for clients have taken him to the moon and back (twice, actually, if you're counting the distance).



Troyer wears many hats in his community and beyond. He's shown attending the Habitat for Humanity Work Camp in Atlanta in 1988 (middle) and being interviewed at a groundbreaking for the St. Joseph County Public Library in 1998, which Troyer Group designed.

## A Man Worth Crowing About

Luke Troyer offers the following anecdotes about his grandfather LeRoy, noting, “These are things that back up my claim that (LeRoy) is super interesting.”

### A birdy told me ...

“When he was young, he actually trained wild crows to be his pets. He trained these crows to be his friends, and they’d nest outside his bedroom. He had a long lane in front of the house, and in the morning he’d walk down the lane to catch the bus to go to school. The two crows would be sitting on his shoulders. Then he’d get on the bus, and they’d fly alongside the bus for a mile or two. Then they’d go back home, and when he got off the bus, they’d land on his shoulders.”

### Run for glory

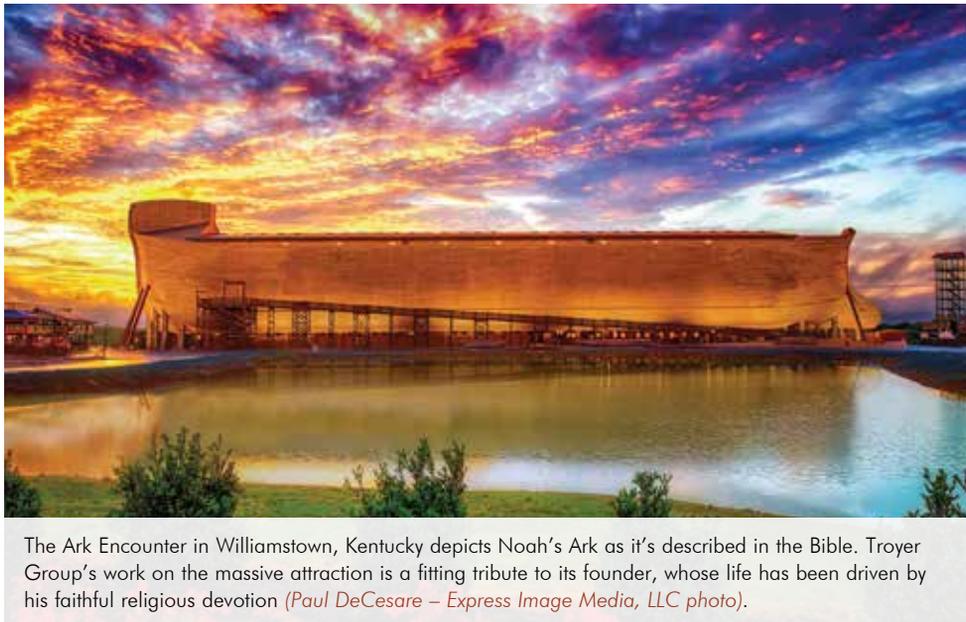
“Also, when he was about 13 or 14, he got polio and was really sick. I think he was almost near death and had been in the hospital for three weeks or so. When he was recovering, he attended his middle school’s track meet. Supposedly, one of the team members didn’t make it that day, and the coach asked him to sub in. At first (LeRoy) asked, ‘Are you kidding? I’m recovering from polio and my hip’s all messed up.’ Well, he ended up racing, and he won the race and set a county record at the time. I just think about that today and think, ‘Are you kidding me?’ To this day, his hip balance is off, so it was so incredible he could do that.”

## Floating on Faith

Faith remains a critical component of LeRoy’s life, and he relishes the opportunity Troyer Group has to work on the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. This towering exhibit and sister attraction of the Creation Museum brings Noah’s Ark to life. Troyer estimates the ark attracts 1.2 million visitors per year.

“They thought they had to do it out of steel, but we said we could do it out of wood,” LeRoy explains. “They were surprised, but Noah did it out of wood, according to the Bible accounts. We were then commissioned to do the master planning for an 800-acre development. The Noah’s Ark is the main attraction. We also did a 1,500-seat restaurant and are working on a 1,200-seat theater.”

The ark, which opened in July 2016, is built according to the dimensions provided in the Bible – 510 feet long, 85 feet wide and 51 feet high.



The Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky depicts Noah’s Ark as it’s described in the Bible. Troyer Group’s work on the massive attraction is a fitting tribute to its founder, whose life has been driven by his faithful religious devotion (Paul DeCesare – Express Image Media, LLC photo).

“He’s been to over 70 countries and flown over one million miles,” Luke quantifies.

But through his travels, LeRoy has learned some eye-opening truths about human nature.

“We’ve learned it’s not the money – but you need to teach people how to fish, rather than giving them a fish,” he advises, reflecting on challenges in his work with Christian colleges in Ethiopia and the former Soviet bloc. “... one challenge in Lithuania is the students grew up in the Soviet Union era. They weren’t taught how to think for themselves. They were told how to think, so thinking creatively was new to them. They had to learn that.”

### Family business

Since 1971, Troyer Group has grown to employ around 40 people and is into its third generation of family members.

“Size was never a goal,” clarifies LeRoy, who still works on special projects for the company. “We tried to assemble the right people to do the job.”

Building with sustainability in mind and a reverence for the landscape remain focal points.

“I like to design with nature – to build in harmony with God’s creation, rather than against it,” he adds.

Overall, creating an environment that produces creativity and facilitates family friendliness are core objectives of the business.

“One of the lessons I’ve learned is to take risks in life, but seek counsel and advice from other people – to be honest, transparent and open about relationships,” LeRoy reflects. “As a firm, we set values we embrace – service, professionalism, honesty and integrity.”

“We also want to be able to have fun, and support family life, and always do the right thing at the right time. Doing the right thing can be hard to do. It’s easy to commit to it, but the hard part is doing it.”

**RESOURCES:** LeRoy and Luke Troyer, Troyer Group, at [www.troyergroup.com](http://www.troyergroup.com)