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July 29, 2022 Vol. 49 No. 28 www.cal-osh.com Since 1973

An Education in Safety

General contractor Rudolph and Sletten has had great success safely performing construction projects at California universities. In the process, it has received recognition from Cal/OSHA under the Voluntary Protection Program for Construction — VPP-C. More importantly, though, is its partnership with and mentoring of subcontractors, or, as it calls them, trade partners. It helps to educate its partners on safety, and this synergy helps spread the safety culture on its projects and others.



The Don Powell Theater renovation project at San Diego State.

“If we can build an ounce of safety into our trade partners out there, they’re going to take that onto another job,” says company President Jon Foad.

Rudolph and Sletten’s latest VPP-C project is the Don Powell and Second Stage Theater project at San Diego State University. This project, slated for completion in early 2023, has seen six trade partners qualify for Cal/OSHA Consultation’s Golden Gate program, which recognizes effective Injury and Illness Prevention Programs. One of the subs, Bali Construction, is now setting its sights on VPP certification of its own.

The project team includes Carlos Moreno, Travis Ehman, Grant Fernando, John O’Connor, Montserrat Fernandez, Noberto Ruvalcaba, Keondre Williams, Mary Thomas, Nestor Comandante, and Paul Leppke.

The two-phase project includes renovating the Don Powell Theatre, a 9,400-square-foot, 490-seat venue within the existing dramatic arts building. Phase two is known as the “second-stage” theater, an almost 15,000-square-foot, two-story building that will house a “black box” theater and sound lab. (A black box theater is a simple performance space, typically with black walls

and a flat floor.)

It is the third CSU project for Rudolph and Sletten to qualify for VPP-C and the ninth overall, dating to 2013.

The crew averages up to 50 employees daily on site (more than 400 total), representing more than 100,000 work hours. “Rudolph and Sletten and our trade partners have worked 266 days with zero doctor cases and zero lost-time injuries,” the company notes. The company’s three-year averages (2019-2021) for total recordable, DART, and X-Mod are 0.55, 0.435, and .90, respectively.

“If we can build an ounce of safety into our trade partners out there, they’re going to take that onto another job.”

– John Foad

Aston Ling, Cal/OSHA senior safety engineer and a member of the VPP-C team, observes that when he evaluates a worksite, “I want to see that what they have written is what is on the site. And that’s what happens here.” In his evaluation of the project, Ling states, “Just like the buildings they construct, [Rudolph and Sletten’s] reputation is built to stand the test of time. R&S’s success, they explain, is owed to its diverse and talented personnel combined with technical expertise, honest estimates, innovative schedules, and ethical business practices.”

‘Eagle Scouts’ of Safety

Rudolph and Sletten conducts mandatory orientations on the first day of the project and each work day begins with reviewing

Theater Project *continued on page 13436*

IN THIS ISSUE

NEWS

00-13433 to 00-13440

- Cal/OSHA’s New Budget
- Inspection Metrics Drop
- A Boring Bit of Safety
- Workplace Fatality Update
- Job Postings

Decisions

40-8865 to 40-8566

- Walmart, Inc.

It is 7,789 days since our last lost-time accident.

Theater Project

continued from page 13433

protocols and procedures to keep employees and students safe. Evacuation procedures also are reviewed. Delivering supplies to the hilly campus is another challenge the company faced at the Cal State East Bay campus, another VPP-C site. ([Click here](#) for our previous coverage.)



***Rudolph and Sletten
President Jon Foad.***

“Safety starts at the top, but safety ends” with employees in the field, Foad states. He recognized Senior Safety Manager Bryan Fink for his “tenacity”



and dedication” to this goal. He notes that Cal/OSHA Consultation has asked the company to mentor other general contractors; Fink will mentor several contractors.

Foad says the safety message can take time to take root. On a hospital project in Fremont, he remembers, he received a text from a subcontractor who was “blown away” by Rudolph and Sletten’s safety protocols, things the contractor said he had never been required to do before. The sub called the requirements “ludicrous” until he embarked on another job, where he found himself “scared every day” because that GC has no safety policies or practices. “He was extremely thankful for what we put him through and the knowledge we gave him as a company to be safe.” Foad adds, “Our goal is not just for our employees and our leadership, but for everybody on our projects to go home safer than they came to work.”

**“You guys are like the Eagle Scouts of safety.
You are the ambassadors.”
– Cal/OSHA Chief Jeff Killip**

Foad and his vice president review and evaluate work-related injuries, illnesses, and near misses with Corporate Safety Director Brian Miller. The team develops or revises accident prevention strategies and creates new objectives, such as identifying training needs.



Cal/OSHA Chief Jeff Killip.

Cal/OSHA Chief Jeff Killip says, “VPP and Consultation are important to me,” during a ceremony commemorating the San Diego State VPP-C certification. Addressing the project team, he added, “You guys are like the Eagle Scouts of Safety, and you are the ambassadors.” VPP team members say that companies with a strong safety commitment make Cal/OSHA’s job easier. “This is where the synergy is,” Killip says. “We can’t do this alone.”

Bob Schulz, University Campus Architect, and associate vice president, also weighed in on project safety. “If I’ve learned anything from the pandemic,” says, “there is nothing we do here as important as going home at night.” He opines that the notion that safety and an efficient workplace conflict is the equine equivalent of b.s. The California State University system, Schulz adds, is moving away from the philosophy of hiring “the best, if they underbid the worst” and has found that the lower the Experience Modification factor (X-Mod), “the better the builder.”

Rudolph and Sletten’s current X-Mod is .51, which is great for a general contractor that also self-performs work.

‘One of the Best Things’

Project Superintendent Carlos Moreno, a company veteran,



The Second Stage portion of the theater project.

who started as a laborer and worked his way up (promoting from within is another Rudolph and Sletten value), says he at first questioned the decision to make the project a VPP-C candidate but concluded, “This is one of the best things I’ve ever done.” Moreno adds, “I have been asked why I work late every day.” He says he is the last employee to leave the site each night so he can ensure each employees leaves the site safely.

Fink notes that the company initially embarked on its VPP journey because it was one of the criteria for a construction industry safety award. But he subsequently discovered that “the important part is the partnership we have developed with Cal/OSHA.” Not to mention the excellent idea of spreading the safety culture to trade partners, who themselves will spread it.



Safety Manager Bryan Fink.

One of those trade partners is Bali Construction, a general engineering contractor specializing in underground utility work. Safety Director Robert Rodriguez says his company has had other experience with VPP-certified companies. “I like the emphasis on safety that people are putting” in the program. “A lot of times, safety is after the fact.” Rudolph and Sletten’s emphasis “stands out,” he tells *Cal-OSHA Reporter*. The company is “visibly attentive to safety” and emphasizes pre-planning to head off hazards.

Bijan Bionghi, a general foreman for Bali, adds that Rudolph and Sletten “address safety in the forefront,” with procedures in place and safety personnel directly involved. “Pre-task meetings are task-specific,” he says. Rudolph and Sletten has 45 pre-task plans. The company develops job hazard analyses as needed for specialized work practices and

conditions. Cal/OSHA notes that Rudolph and Sletten places “special emphasis on new employees to help mentor and educate them into the safety culture.”

The company also rewards safety performance with “positive recognition,” but will discipline if necessary. Cal/OSHA notes that one subcontractor employee was removed from the project for failing to adhere to safety rules.



Superintendent Carlos Moreno.

“If an when an imminent hazard occurs, all work in the vicinity of the exposure is stopped immediately. Work cannot resume until the hazard has been fully abated.”

This attention to detail resulted in Bionghi making a critical observation and decision on the project, which company officials say potentially saved lives.

Our accompanying sidebar has the details.

Bali had achieved Golden Gate recognition before starting the San Diego State project, where it will be working until late 2022. Rodriguez says the company also is giving strong consideration to VPP certification of its own. “That’s likely the next step for us.”

Rudolph and Sletten has two more VPP-C projects in the works, including a veterans’ skilled nursing facility in Yountville and the Performing Arts Building at Cal State San Bernardino. VPP-Construction participants are limited to only three projects enrolled in the program at any time.

Trade Partners Earn Golden Gate Honors

Six trade partners on the Don Powell Theater Project have qualified for Cal/OSHA Consultation’s Golden Gate program, which recognizes employers with effective Injury and Illness Prevention Programs. The IIPP is the foundation for an employer’s safety program. Those qualifying for the program through this project include:

- Dynaelectric, an electrical contractor;
- Bali Construction, underground utilities (which previously qualified for Golden Gate);
- University Mechanical, HVAC/plumbing;
- Williams & Sons, concrete work;
- Nevell Group, interior/exterior ceiling and wall systems; and
- Brand Safway, scaffolding.

A Coin for a Good Catch

Rudolph and Sletten issues “Challenge Coins” to employees and trade partners to promote greater awareness on job sites and who make good safety issue catches. The coins are recognition to spur employees to look around their workspace for 10 seconds, 10 feet around their area, every 10 minutes.

The concept has its roots in a serious incident some years ago, which could have been avoided had the person involved taken time to survey the surroundings.

At its recent ceremony marking the VPP-C certification



Bali Construction Safety Director Robert Rodriguez (left) and General Foreman Bihan Bionghi.

of the Don Powell Theater Project, Rudolph and Sletten’s Oscar Amancio singled out one trade partner whose actions very well could have prevented a nasty incident.

Bijan Bionghi, general foreman for Bali Construction, which is performing underground work on the project, was about to start a dig where underground utilities had been previously identified – or so it was thought. “Bijan recognized that there was a light post about 10 to 15 feet to the left and said, ‘You know what, I’m going to dig cautiously, because I think there may be an electric line that wasn’t identified.’” Sure enough, there was a line in the dig area. “Who knows what could have happened,” Amancio comments.

He lauded Bali as an “exceptional team,” and for the “exceptional work you’re doing with safety.”



The Rudolph and Sletten Challenge Coin.