John Patrick “Pat” Philbin, AIST’s Manager — Technology Programs, retired on 31 December 2019. His career in the steel industry took him around the world. Over his 50 years in steel, he’s seen it all. And as a boy growing up with three older sisters, he’s certainly heard it all. In his life, he’s toured steel mills in all corners of the world, eaten in some of the most famous restaurants in the country, he’s been to Wimbledon, he saw The Beatles perform live in 1966 ... so what could possibly be in store for Pat once he’s retired?

I asked Pat this question when we were sitting in the Miami-Dade County Airport, waiting for our connecting flight to Panama City back in October. “Tennis,” he said.

Really? I thought.

But the longer I thought about it, the more it made sense. Pat (or “Monsignor” or “Brother Pat,” if you’re among the many inclined to know him as such) possesses an undeniably zest for the things that matter most in life — doing things that bring him joy and being with those he loves.

Pat’s network of those he loves expanded greatly once he joined AIST as a staff engineer in 2008, but he also forged countless friendships in the decades he spent in Northeastern Ohio’s steelmaking community.

After graduating high school, he did a short stint at Republic Steel. He then left for General Electric in
Pat is, for me and for many in our industry, a lot more than a reliable and dependable point of contact at AIST. The iron and steel industry is a very special place to work; it’s better described as a big human being rather than a complex machine. It has a heart, which is the furnace — blast furnace, electric arc, etc. — and it has its blood, which is the liquid steel. It has arms and legs, which are the rolling mills, the processing lines, etc. Every time we get close to the parts of this organism, we feel like we are taking care of a person, an emotional one. And there are people who do it with the respect that this huge organism deserves. This is what Pat is: a person capable of understanding the feelings of the iron and steel industry, and it is because of people like Pat that our industry is so good to work in. I have an incommensurable admiration for his expertise, which is superseded only by the kindness he uses in his personal relationships. I can’t remember a single time in which I asked him for help and he said no, and these are things that one will never forget.

— Francesco Memoli, Tenova

Warren, Ohio, where he worked while attending Youngstown State University.

Pat rejoined Republic Steel in 1976. He began as an industrial engineer and eventually transferred into BOF operations as a technical operating trainee in 1978 at the BOF. He was turn foreman until 1982 and a senior melter until 1988. During his Republic Steel years, Pat met his wife, Rebecca, who was the company’s first female turn supervisor.

It was during this time that Pat began to hone some of the skills he’s known best for — being an innovator and leader, and encouraging and inspiring others. This was due to the fact that he was in charge of introducing new procedures and technologies, a hard thing to do at an integrated steel mill in the 1970s.

“[I was] an outcast in my own department because I had the responsibility of introducing new trials and procedures that weren’t well received, and that were at times sabotaged,” Pat explained. “So the resistance to accept change in a process world was my biggest challenge, but that forced me to make sure I learned the process better than anybody else.”
Not only did he learn the process, he “inspired the doubters that there was a better way.”

“That’s been my goal and direction in terms of whether I’m leading a crew, whether I was leading a department, or when I came back at the end of my career and had Technology Committees that I was responsible for.”

In 1988, Pat became the general turn supervisor in the BOF/LMF (the company was known as WCI Steel by that point), where he was responsible for a crew of 50 employees. In 2006, he became area manager for the BOF, and a year later area manager, picklers in the steel finishing department.

Pat stayed in the Warren area even when he joined AIST in 2008, a commute of more than an hour each way. I asked him why he would want to take on such a long drive each day, and why he continued to do so year after year.

Being friends with Pat has not been easy. It has meant generally always dining at P.F. Chang’s or California Pizza Kitchen. He has an internal GPS that allows him to seek these restaurants out regardless of the city we were in. He has always carried an extra suitcase for the candy and chocolate to treat us with. Pat’s phone number on my caller ID brightens my day until I realize that he is telling me that he has volunteered me for something … he is hard to say no to. He is there to pick me up when I am down, to listen when I am uncertain, to counsel me when I am walking a narrow path, and the first to celebrate both my personal and professional accomplishments. To sum it up, he has always been the champion in my corner and, man, I am blessed to call him my friend.

— Harriet Dutka, Sangraf International
Pat has been the glue that has allowed me to fully expand my career horizons within the iron and steel industry.

If there was one anecdote I would like to share about Pat, it would be the first lunch engagement on our first EAF Study Tour to Argentina. We had just arrived after a 10-hour flight and we were famished. Our group was corralled by Pat to a local eating establishment. The local fare was a steady dose of meat, meat and more meat. Pat had a gander at the menu, and decided that the blood sausage had to be sampled. When it arrived, it looked like it was still alive, but we all knuckled down and gave it a try. It was divine. If it hadn’t been for Pat, we would never have given it a thought, but Pat was all about expanding our horizons, and that’s exactly what we did for the remainder of our study tour.

— Stephan Ferenczy, TCI Consultants

“Because I was happy where I was traveling to,” he said, “And I was satisfied and content going home each and every night. I couldn’t imagine a more progressive and productive work atmosphere.”

Ron Ashburn, AIST’s executive director, described what it means for AIST to have a long-time steel industry veteran such as Pat on staff.

“Pat brought with him a strong desire to give something back to the industry when he decided to join the AIST staff. That ‘something’ was the complete embodiment of energy, passion and commitment to teach our staff how to provide real value to the industry.”

“His tireless efforts resulted in strong committee leadership, quality curriculum for our training courses and productive Road Shows to pave the path for member engagement. Despite serving 50 years in the industry, Pat never lost his youthful commitment to help others succeed — in this regard, the AIST membership and staff have been his beneficiary.”

When asked about Pat’s legacy, his friends throughout the industry echoed similar sentiments.

“Pat’s expertise in the industry, and his efforts to recruit and educate young men and women, has been a great positive force,” said Jimmy Barrett, of Allied Mineral Products. “The steel industry will miss this legend, and I will miss working with him.”

Brad Bray of California Steel Industries added, “Pat’s tireless work for AIST will be missed. His presence at committee meetings always meant that the
meeting was going to be professional and beneficial to attend.”

Pat’s responsibilities at AIST took him across the United States and all over the world. In particular, AIST’s International Study Tour program has been an integral part of Pat’s job over the last several years.

“The Study Tours] have been probably the most enjoyable experience not just at my AIST career, but my career in total,” Pat recalled. “Just being able to see different parts of the world, cultures, steel processes, the friendships — truly global networking at its finest.”

Stephan Ferenczy, TCI Consultants, is a regular attendee of AIST’s International Study Tours.

“I have accompanied Pat on six separate EAF and Caster Study Tours, and Pat’s company made the technical and professional benefits of these tours.” Pat has the uncanny ability to motivate and encourage members to continually improve their committees toward the benefit of their companies. He knew that without members returning with benefits, there was no reason for companies to continue sending their employees.

Over the years, working closely with Pat on projects, committees and events, I’ve learned three things: he doesn’t like to have his picture taken; he loves to eat at P.F. Chang’s; and if you feed him ice cream, there is nothing that you can’t get away with.

Our friendship grew to something more than the steel industry, it became a brotherhood. As matter of fact, when I call Pat, I say, “Brother Pat,” and many of my associates do the same. We became something that will last forever, and it is mainly due to Brother Pat, or as some of us like to refer him, “Monsignor.”

—Doug Niksch, retired, Mi-Jack Products
experience more enjoyable and memorable. In fact, I can't imagine traveling to new countries without him,” Ferenczy said.

Jesse DeSpain of Nucor Steel–Texas weighed in, after spending a few days in Panama City, Panama, with Pat and the Material Handling Technology Committee (MHTC).

“Pat has always kept our committee meetings light and entertaining with his clever and witty personality. He will truly be missed as a leader and a friend. One thing I did not know when I joined the MHTC was the amount of lifetime friendships I would make — Pat certainly is one of them.”

I have known and worked alongside Pat for almost 40 years, having first met him in 1980 when he was with Republic Steel in Warren, Ohio. I have been the “Vicar” to Pat’s “Monsignor” all of these years. There are many, many memorable stories — unfortunately most of which aren’t publishable!

Pat is one of the best human beings that I know: very much the family man, he is fair, honest, loyal, capable, dependable and knowledgeable. He has a delightful sense of humor, is very much a prankster and is always great fun to be around. Pat is also a true friend to anyone in need — not a single selfish bone in him, just a wonderful man all round; it’s a pity there aren’t more in the world like him. I have been a very lucky person in being able to call Pat my friend.

— Stewart Robinson, Carbide Industries
Another AIST program Pat has devoted much attention and many miles to is the Road Show. Since its inception in 2015, Pat has attended 29 AIST Road Shows across the country. A third-generation steelworker, he couldn’t pass up the opportunities to visit the mills and talk to people who, as he sees it, are just like him. And that attitude is the embodiment of Pat Philbin. Bringing people together, helping others and finding common ground is something that seems to come naturally to him.

“I think in my time at AIST, my strongest asset was realizing that I was once a producing committee member. I was able to translate the needs of the
committee members and try to help — like I had been helped many times before," Pat said.

Ferenczy said, “Pat has always been a leader and an innovator, is always looking to get out of his comfort zone, and has always brought people together so that they can become better steelmakers after interacting with one another.”

“Pat is like a brother to me,” Barrett added. “Pat likes to call me Brother Jimmy and I call him Brother Pat. Our friendship was bonded by family values and the difference between the great Air Force vs. the Navy. He is so proud of [his son] Sean’s graduating number two in his class at the U.S. Naval Academy.”

Stewart Robinson, who has known Pat since his Republic Steel days, said, “Our industry will be a sadder place without him, and I know AIST will be a very different place to work without his presence. We will all miss him very much.”

“Pat brought a sense of reality to the AIST staff,” explained Ashburn. “His industry tenure has spanned the complete spectrum — the best of times and the worst of times. For many of the younger generation who perhaps have not witnessed the industry bankruptcies, or the loss of a pension
after a lifetime of service, Pat was always able to bring everything into proper context, which has kept us all well grounded. He did it with crass … I mean class and grace!”

And the countless friendships he’s made over the years? Monsignor simply calls them “Wonderful.”

“You want somebody to pick up the phone and if they hear it’s you, they’re happy. That’s the kind of impact you want to have.”

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**In His Own Words**

I started my steel career on 2 June 1969. The morning following my high school graduation, I was scheduled at the Republic Steel Warren Division’s Coke Battery. My first job was mudding lids after charging the ovens on the battery floor. My dad wanted me to experience what working for a living was all about! Both of my grandfathers worked in the steel industry — one for Republic Steel’s Youngstown Division and the other for Youngstown Sheet & Tube.

After working 6 months at Republic Steel, I moved on to General Electric’s Ohio Lamp Division, where I was employed as a production line mechanic while working my way through Youngstown State University. In 1976, I returned to work for Republic Steel in their BOF Department. Here I was introduced to Dr. John Stubbles, Republic Steel Research, and Dr. Stewart Robinson, Carbide Industries, who served as my mentors. In 1976, I attended my first Iron & Steel Society (ISS) Cleveland Chapter meeting. I then became part of the Oxygen Steelmaking Committee of the ISS. My two oldest committee member relationships started with Brother John Wilson, MINTEQ International, and Brother George Jansen, Carbide Industries. Lifelong friends are what can develop through involvement with AIST Member Chapters and Technology Committees.

My career with AIST started on 1 February 2008. I could not have imagined in these past almost-12 years the satisfaction with Technology Committee involvement that resulted. Old committee friends and new committee members have kept me engaged in the role of increasing the awareness for networking with AIST. I’ve been part of an incredible team at AIST that has made my steel career a success.

Special thanks to Bill Albaugh, who hired me at AIST; Brian Bliss, who guided me while at AIST; Dr. Ron O’Malley, who has traveled with me on seven international Study Tours; and Ron Ashburn, who has encouraged me to make AIST the best technical steel association worldwide.