

Christopher Petteys opens up about his transition to CEO amid the pandemic

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Chris Petteys is CEO of Forell Elsesser Structural Engineers.

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By [Sarah Klearman](#) - Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
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For [Chris Petteys](#), it began with a desire to understand the world around him.

He entered UCLA as an electrical engineering major. After his first year, he called his father, a UCLA alum, looking for advice: Electrical engineering, Petteys told his dad, just didn't feel like something tangible. He wasn't passionate about it. "I really like understanding how things work, and problem solving – touching, feeling and understanding the world around me," he told me. "Civil engineering really brought that out."

Petteys became CEO of San Francisco-based structural engineering firm Forell Elsesser in September 2020. The pandemic, he said, was in some sense helpful to his transition into the role, which lasted more than a year and a half. What the firm needed was leadership, and Petteys, with the help of the Forell's newly created team of directors and outgoing CEO [Simin Naaseh](#), stepped up to be just that.

You're from Southern California. How did you end up in the Bay Area? My wife is from the Bay Area. We met at UCLA and this is where we wanted to end up.

You joined Forell Elsesser as an engineer in 2009. How has the way the firm approaches its projects evolved? Technology is a big part of change. We've become extremely efficient in what we do in terms of analysis and calculations. We have an amazing staff that always wants to do better.

There's now three-dimensional modeling, so everything lives in the 3D world now in what we do. That has given us an avenue to engage more with the architect and other designers on a team. We all have our own models that get overlaid and meshed together. That helps us get answers quicker, and coordinate and solve problems faster, and that speed allows us to spend more time with and provide better service to the client and owner.

What advice would you give to your younger self? For me, it's figuring out where you find your happiness. Where do you see yourself being happy, being successful, being a contributor? Go there. Once you get there, build a career around that.

The other thing I would tell younger engineers is that this is a marathon. A decision you make now is not going to make or break you 30 years down the road. You're flexible and so is the world around you – don't be afraid to make a change if it's better for you.

What do you feel are the defining projects you've worked on or overseen at Forell? Before becoming CEO, my most important project was the retrofit at California Memorial Stadium in Berkeley. That is one of the projects I started on in 2009, and it really gave me a trajectory in the firm and industry.

In terms of projects wrapping up now under my purview, one of the biggest ones is LinkedIn headquarters. That job has been going on for years, and is wrapping up now. Another big development for us during my tenure has been the life sciences expansion. There's lots of life sciences work going on, and we've pushed hard to get into the marketplace.

CHRIS PETTEYS

Forell | Elsesser

Headquarters: San Francisco

Founded: 1960

What it does: Structural engineering firm whose specialty is the seismic performance of structures, ensuring they can survive an earthquake

2020 revenue: \$10 million

Employees: About 45

Current goals: Understanding and reducing the carbon impact of a particular building's design; diversification of staff and leadership team

About Petteys

Age: 42

Born: Cerritos

Residence: Danville

Education: B.S. and M.S., UCLA

Family: Married with three kids – 11, 9 and 4

Projects he's excited about: LinkedIn headquarters; the Salt Lake Temple in Salt Lake City, Utah

THE (NEW) ROUTINE

"Work life balance is something most of us are striving for and this experience gave us good perspective on this, really forcing work and life to co-exist. I think we've learned a lot about how to balance these and really let them interact in a less cumbersome manner. I think this is one of the silver-linings from the pandemic, understanding that we can have more flexibility that really enhances both our work life and personal life."

You became CEO in 2020. Tell me about that transition. It really speaks highly to [Simin Naaseh](#) and Paul Rodler, the previous CEO and COO. They were very open about what would make sense for the firm. We engaged in a thoughtful, patient process and talked about what we thought would be best – what would be the right fit in terms of individuals. We also came up with the new leadership structure where we maintain a COO and a CEO, but also developed various director positions. We made a concerted effort to put deliberate leadership in certain areas of the practice to expand and be successful going into the future.

Simin and I were working hand-in-hand before the transition going into the pandemic trying to work through all the issues that came up together so there wouldn't just be a handoff – we overlapped for quite some time.

The silver lining of the pandemic is that it showed us we can do anything. It's not necessarily where you work, but how you work and who you're working with. What we've been focused on is how we do our job and interact with each other.

What do you think made you the right "fit" for the CEO job? I think what has made me successful and put me in that spot is that I'm a person who cares about those around me. I put clients and partners first to make sure they have what they need to be successful.

And, being a real person. It's kind of a goofy thing to say, but that is something the pandemic brought. We're all dealing with something together. Being real about it, and acknowledging that there's another human on the other side of the table and knowing we can solve problems or make the situation better.

What is a goal you're working toward in your professional or personal life? I have young kids, which is unique for someone in my position. So there's no real goal other than survival. But my goal professionally, and for Forell, is exposure. We have a great story to tell. We are an amazing firm – we've done projects I guarantee you have heard of, but maybe not known who was behind the engineering feat. We're using that to grow our firm and our brand because there's so much good there.

What is your go-to method to decompress after work? I run a lot. Every morning. That is my way to either get ready for the day or forget about the day before. Whether it's running or hiking, those are the things I go to frequently to get my head in the right spot. My wife and I hike in the Las Trampas hills, and I spend a lot of time running on the Iron Horse trail.

THE LIST

Largest Bay Area Construction Projects

Ranked by Construction cost

RECOMMENDED

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

Developer pitches 156 units for South Berkeley site



RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE

Luxury Beavercreek home hits market for \$1.5M (Photos)



CAREER & WORKPLACE

Most Admired CEOs 2021: Anthony Naccarato, O'Donnell & Naccarato

