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Walter Zable, Cubic's Only Boss, Not Ready To Retire as He Enters Connect Hall of Fame

■ BY MIKE ALLEN

In an era of button-down, slicker-than-Teflon CEOs, Walter J. Zable is an anomaly, a man from a different time who is prone to telling self-effacing jokes and dropping the occasional swear word.

Then again, after reaching 90 years of age and still maintaining a full-time work schedule at **Cubic Corp.**, the company he founded in 1951, there is little room for pretense.

Zable won't entertain the concept of retiring. To him, Cubic, which generated more than \$800 million in revenues last year, is his life; without it, he'd be lost.

"What would I do?" asks Zable, sitting in his wood-paneled, spacious corner office at Cubic's Kearny Mesa headquarters.

"If I retired, I'd be at home, reading technical books and wouldn't be in the real world."

Still engaged in many aspects of Cubic's operations, Zable puts in full eight-hour workdays and keeps abreast of the company's projects and prospects.

"The beautiful thing about this type of business is that it's not making desks or standard type stuff. This is state of the art, and you have to be ahead of the game. And technology is so interesting. It's an avocation," he says.

To recognize Zable's achievements and contributions to San Diego's high-tech community, Connect, a nonprofit trade association targeting new technology businesses, named him last month as the second inductee to its Entrepreneur Hall of Fame. The first inductee was Irwin Jacobs, founder of **Qualcomm Inc.**, who retired as chief executive officer last year.

Zable will be honored at a dinner Feb. 22 at the **Estancia La Jolla**.

Longtime friend Barry Shillito, a former president of Ryan Aeronautical, said his buddy has an amazing energy level.

Nonstop at 90



Melissa Jacobs

At 90, Walter J. Zable still puts in full workdays at Cubic Corp., the San Diego firm he founded in 1951.

"He's the kind of person who can't stand still," said Shillito, 85, who is retired. "Cubic is part of him. He founded it and he still stays very close to what's happening."

Tremendous Growth

When Zable launched his new business in 1951, he had just a few contracted workers. Today, the company's two divisions, defense and transportation, employ more than 6,000 people.

Bruce Ahern, a former Cubic employee, said if nothing else, Cubic and Zable deserve kudos just for surviving all the corporate upheavals and acquisitions that eliminated so many of the area's larger aerospace and high-tech manufacturers.

"After all those years, it's still going strong," Ahern said. "Look at who's around today, and they're still able to hold on. Practically everybody else that was around then is gone."

A large part of the reason for Cubic's success can be traced to Zable, a hands-on leader who fostered a family atmosphere, Ahern said.

"He was very much a father figure to a lot of people, and it was not uncommon to find people who would spend their whole career there, and be very proud of that; a lot of workers referred to him as Uncle Walt."

Engineering Background

Before Zable started Cubic, he worked for a number of companies as an engineer. In 1949, he moved his young family (he has a son and daughter, both working at Cubic) to Riverside, setting up the electronics division for a now-defunct New York company. After the firm failed, he took a job with General Dynamics' Convair division in San Diego. He was put in charge of microwave and antenna development.

After a year and a half, Zable launched his own business with about \$5,000 and \$20 worth of testing equipment. In its first year, Cubic roughly did \$100,000 in sales and turned a profit, Zable said.

Although its early history is concentrated on the electronics industry, Cubic made a host of diverse products and got into things that made pinning down the company difficult.

Zable: Leader of Cubic Corp. to Be Honored Next Month in La Jolla

Among some of its products were the first scoreboard for Qualcomm Stadium, when it was still called San Diego Stadium; a satellite surveying system that was the forerunner of the global positioning system technology; transmitters that were installed in the Hubble space telescope; and a combat training system to guide Navy pilots.

The latter system, initially developed in the early 1970s, was featured in the 1986 hit movie "Top Gun."

The company also got into making specialized paper products and toilet seat covers after it acquired a smaller firm that was in that line of business in 1971.

"They explored a number of areas to diversify the company's base; some worked and some didn't," Ahern said.

A Prodigy

Zable's irrepressible curiosity and zeal for learning was fostered early on while attending Boston schools. When he was in fourth grade, he recalled building a crystal radio set, but because he didn't have any earphones, and couldn't afford the \$15 price tag (a small fortune in 1924), he couldn't hear anything.

One day, young Zable was sitting on his doorstep when a truck drove by, and off flew a pair of earphones, he recalled, still smiling from this stroke of good luck. He picked up the earphones and ran upstairs and was able to hear the broadcast of live big-band music playing at a local Boston restaurant.

Zable continued his interest in electronics at Boston Technical School, a high school that taught students electronics, and attended lectures at the nearby Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

A top-flight athlete in football, baseball and track, Zable received a full scholarship at the College of William & Mary in Virginia. His prowess on the gridiron was such that he worked part-time after graduation playing for the Richmond Arrows, a professional team.

Back in 1937, pro football was in its infancy, and players were earning anywhere from \$50 to \$100 a game, so young Zable decided to pursue other lines. Yet Zable's collegiate career was exceptional, and in 1980 he was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame. In 1987, the National Collegiate Athletic Association gave Zable the Teddy Roosevelt Award.

Zable is cagey when the question of who will succeed him comes up. "I haven't found one yet," he says, laughing.

David Nuffer, the chairman of San Diego-based public relations firm **Nuffer Smith Tucker**, worked for Cubic from 1964 to 1967 as its corporate spokesman. He called Zable "an incredible leader."

"He allowed his lead engineers and lead executives to develop new products, and pursue new marketing ideas," Nuffer said.

Abe Wischina, another former Cubic spokesman, said Zable provides a role model of how people can age gracefully.

"He stays active, stays engaged and keeps looking for ways to learn," he said.

The lack of any succession plan at Cubic confounds most stock analysts who cover the firm's thinly traded stock, but at least one has come to accept the situation.

"It was perplexing," said Paul Coster of JP Morgan Securities Inc. in New York. "But after a number of years of covering the stock I've come to see that we're all wrong to be perplexed. I discovered after awhile that Mr. Zable is, in fact, going to live forever and I've become quite comfortable with that notion."

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