

James A. Willis, P.E.
Sr. Civil Engineer



James A. Willis (Jim) is no stranger to hard work. Jim acquired his first job working as a janitor at his junior high school when he was just 14 years old. He spent years as a lifeguard and later delivered tires from the warehouse of a local tire distributor. Perhaps the most influential job he ever had was working for a brick mason. Although steady work and quite lucrative, he soon learned he did not want a life-long career of manual labor. So why did he not pursue a career in teaching like both of his parents? Jim genuinely believes teaching is an admirable profession, but the bottom line is, he wanted to make more money. As he reflected on potential careers, the choice seemed clear...civil engineering. Jim enjoyed design and construction; civil engineering provided the opportunity for both.

Jim received his Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Utah, working the entire time of course. He worked for UPS throughout college because they provided top-notch benefits, a needed commodity for his young family, and tuition reimbursement which covered most of his degree. He considers his time at UPS a valuable life experience.

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However, if you want to know about the crowning moment of his college career, you need to understand the story behind the University of Utah towel that hangs in his Salt Lake City office. Jim was a decent swimmer in high school and enjoyed the sport, so he wanted to continue swimming after graduation. A friend convinced him they should try out for the University of Utah swim team, a 13-year NCAA championship program. The two knew the swim team coach had previously attended their high school so they decided to talk to him. The coach encouraged them to join summer workouts (two swims per day plus an hour in the gym) and tryout in the fall. Many of their friends doubted them and told them they would never make it. After three rounds of cuts, Jim made the team! The towel, a prized possession that can only be earned by being on the team, hangs in his office to remind him 'you can do hard things, even when you don't think you can. If you have a goal, why not give it a try? Don't let the doubters stop you'.

After college, Jim was hired by Jack Johnson, a small land development firm, not the musician. Jim enjoyed several years developing second homes in and around Park City, Utah before a market crash in 2009 resulted in layoffs, himself included. He was unemployed for nearly a year, during which time he enjoyed "playing" with the kids while his wife went back to work, but Jim knew this could not last forever. He began looking at different industries because the future of land development was in jeopardy, which is when he discovered an opportunity in the mining industry. Jim was hired as a Civil Engineer for a large consulting and engineering firm. After a few years, an opportunity presented itself to work for a small start-up company,



Tierra Group International, Ltd. (Tierra Group). Jim did not enjoy the larger, corporate style company so the idea of working for Tierra Group appealed to him. He appreciates knowing everyone he works with and having access to company management that embodies a team approach by listening to the ideas of all its employees. He believes the people in a company make the difference and Jim invests a lot of time in his



teammates and tries to glean something from everyone. *'From the experienced people to the new staff, everyone brings a different perspective and I try to learn something new from everyone. We all have something to teach others.'* One of his favorite professional experiences was a trip to Tierra Group's office in Lima, Perú where he was able to meet the coworkers he has worked with remotely while experiencing a new country.

Jim also shared a life lesson on being prepared for field assignments. He remembers one of his first site visits to conduct a dam inspection. After getting into the hotel late the night before, he found himself wrestling with a pair of jeans that morning. After a bit of time, he discovered the problem. He was trying to put on a pair of his wife's jeans...adorned with "bling"! Jim was forced to wear his slacks from the previous day and learned a valuable lesson...double check your suitcase before a field assignment.

Jim is finding fulfillment in his switch to the mining industry. He enjoys the freedom to problem solve and provide creative solutions to real-time challenges...often on a tight budget. He especially enjoys working with smaller mine operations because the process creates strong relationships with the clients and stakeholders which makes the design process more interesting.

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"Engineering is engineering. It is more or less the same anywhere you go. What makes the difference is the people you do that engineering with."
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When asked what his future holds, Jim paused and reflected for a bit. At this point in his career, there have been many milestones to celebrate; passing the Fundamentals of Engineering Exam, earning his Professional Engineer license in multiple states, and becoming a Project Manager. He looks forward to continuing professional growth and managing more, and maybe even bigger, projects. Having recently co-authored his first industry publication, he hopes to give more to the mining industry through future publications. Oh, and it would be nice to pay off his house in the next 5 years.



Work hard, play hard! Jim lives these words to the fullest. He has spent his entire life living in the Salt Lake City valley and enjoying all it has to offer. The third of six children, he fondly remembers family get togethers at Little Sahara Sand Dunes, extended family included, where they rode dirt bikes, 3-wheelers and lots more. These days he can be found exploring the outdoors with his wife and their four children as often as possible. He enjoys most outdoor activities - hunting, fishing, hiking, biking – but you won't find him rock climbing or sky diving; he prefers to keep his feet close to the ground.

If you ask his kids what his favorite hobby is, they would probably tell you home improvement projects. Most notably, building a pool in their backyard several years ago. He also enjoys woodworking and has built several beds in their home, including a sleigh bed. However, when given a choice, Jim undoubtedly spends his free time on his road bike.