I thought I would start this address on a personal note. When I graduated from University back in the early 80's the world was in the middle of an economic recession. In Vancouver, I searched around trying to find employment as a surveyor, without much luck. Everyone was downsizing. Struggling to hold on to the people they had.

Eventually, I found work with a BC Land Surveyor named George Miller in North Vancouver. George didn’t have a lot of work, but he had a generous heart. By the late fall even the little work he had, had dwindled, and I found myself working only 2-3 days a week. On one of my days off, I happened by the offices of Underhill & Underhill. I was interviewed on the spot by Bill Robinson, and following his conversation with George to make sure it was OK to steal away this young man, I found I had a new job. Bill introduced me to his partner Jack Parnell, who exclaimed, “But Bill, we have no work!” Bill had a pretty firm view on things. If Bill said it was - it was. I was hired.

When I went to pick up my things from George’s office he sat me down, chuckled, and said something along these lines, “My boy, you are very lucky. I know these surveyors you are going to work for, and they are some of the best we have. You watch, you listen, you learn, and maybe someday you will count yourself lucky to be half the surveyor they are. Don’t blow it!”

Being young and a little full of myself (that would be the University training), I initially did not heed George’s words. In the next few years working with Underhill’s I travelled and surveyed the width and breadth of this beautiful Province, and a good portion of the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and eventually overseas to Europe, and Asia. George’s words would be beaten into me by experience alone. Now, after some 30 years with the firm, I do count myself very lucky, and if I have accomplished anything in my time with Underhill’s it has been because I was lifted up on the shoulders of Giants.¹

Now, these giants include amongst their number: Dave Underhill, Art Holmes, Bill Robinson, Jack Parnell, Jim Sharpe, Tim Koepke, Bruce Underhill, my old master Ivan Royan, and Terry Connolly. If you’re counting - that’s five past presidents of the Association of British Columbia Land Surveyors, three past presidents of the Association of Canada Land Surveyors, and the person they all would agree is probably the best Land Surveyor to ever walk through the doors of Underhill’s.
Now, with modesty, and humility, these giants will deny that they are in fact giants. But from my perch they are, and I’m sure if you asked them what their measure of the likes of Clare & Jim Underhill, or Horace Fraser, was - they would say without hesitation - now, they were Giants! In fact, Dave Underhill said something like that to me last month at Helen Underhill’s 100th Birthday Celebration. Happy Birthday Helen – I can’t say that enough.

What makes someone a giant?

100 years ago, around this time of year, a couple of young gentlemen - Clare and Jim Underhill - newly minted BC Land Surveyors - started a partnership - Underhill & Underhill - in a tiny office - in the Lumberman’s Building, about 6 blocks east of here (the building is still there to this day).

After the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914 the brothers along with many other young men of their generation put their family and career aspirations on hold and went to the front. They saw action in Gallipoli, and the Somme. They were wounded. They lost brothers.

Now, were they Giants? Some would say yes.

Afterwards, they, along with everyone else suffered through the Spanish Influenza - arguably the greatest pandemic in history. They struggled just to provide the basic necessities of life for their families through the great depression of the 1930's.

Now, were they Giants?

After the depression came WWII. Again, business took a back seat to national service. Their wives, sons, daughters, staff, and even the old warriors themselves Clare, Jim, and Horace all did their part. Again, there were losses.

To paraphrase a great man, “The ultimate measure of any one of us is not where we stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where we stand in times of challenge and controversy."

Through their actions, and service to country, community, and profession, these gentlemen, along with many others of their generation, stand as giants in the hearts and minds of those of us who follow them.
After that war the business would finally prosper. The company would be at the forefront of new innovations in the fields of surveying and engineering for over 1/2 a century. These included such things and Electronic Distance Measurement, Electronic Computing, CAD, Satellite Positioning, GIS, and Laser Scanning. All these technologies required new expertise and people like Art Holmes, Dave Underhill, Bill Mah, Chris el Araj, and others, were there to solve the problems and make it all work like magic.

New partners would be brought in as equals - like brothers. A practice that continues to this day.

In 1970, a young Tim Koepke would be sent to start a new office in Whitehorse. Tim recounts that, before he left, Clare and Jim sat him down to give him his marching orders that went something like this: “This is a family business and your employees should be treated like family. Do your work well and do it right - the first time. Treat each of your clients like they are the only one you have and you will find them back on your doorstep the next time they need your services. Don’t do things on the cheap - cheap gets you less. Concentrate on building relationships and value, and don’t expect to turn a profit for three years.”

Sage advice, even today.

You know, even amongst the staff there were giants.

I remember my first letter to a client. Bill Robinson said to me, “Just dictate it to Colleen. She’ll type it up for you”. Now, Colleen, prior to being with Underhill’s, had been the secretary to the Prime Minister of South Africa. She could type at what seemed an ungodly speed. I dictated my letter. Colleen’s eyes never left my face, and all the while a symphony was emanating from her IBM Selectric Typewriter. Seemingly, before I had finished dictating, Colleen ripped the letter from the typewriter. “Check it”, she said. I looked at it, my jaw dropped. She said, “Well?” I said, “It’s wonderful, but it’s not what I said”. Her reply, “Yes dear, but it’s what you meant to say.” I nodded in agreement, and signed the letter.

Stan Thorne was the head draftsman when I started at Underhill’s. He could draft a plan freehand, in India ink, sometimes in mere minutes without making a single error. One day I had to get a plan out but was needed in the field. Bill Robinson said, “Just give your notes to Stan, he’ll get it done.” When I got back from the
field I was beckoned over by Stan. “Just a couple of things.”, he said. Stan had discovered and fixed every error in what was clearly now my very shoddy notes. “Don’t worry”, he whispered “I won’t tell Bill.” Today, Lynn Renaud, Allan Lee, Jonathan Dyke, and Kathy Young, current senior draftspersons and office staff here, are still providing this “I won’t tell the boss” service to our field crews. You thought it was a secret, didn’t you? They do it too well.

While Land Surveyors in Training are assigned to a Land Surveyor to oversee and guide them during their articles, it is really the survey assistants, and instrument persons, that provide the bulk of the field training. People like Earl Shook, the infamous Ernie Cook, Steve Fox, Kelly Lanigan, Frank Taki, and Rob Strand, trained generations of Land Surveyors at Underhill’s. Rob Strand once joked, “31 years without stepping off the first rung of the ladder. It’s got to count for something.” Well Rob, it does. Others would not have been able to climb that ladder without you holding it, telling them where to put their feet, and catching their fall. If Rob was here today he’d be saying, “You got that right, who’d they send us this time!”.

All these people, these giants, and many more, are the real foundations of Underhill. Underhill is a firm built on and by its employees and their good work, and on those clients who recognize that.

In closing, I’d like to give some advice to the young surveyors, engineers, drafters, and others starting out - You don’t need to aspire to be giants. Your challenge is only to heed the words of Jim and Clare Underhill. Treat your coworkers and employees like family. Do your work well, and do it right. Treat each of your clients like they are the only one you have. Be a person of action. When the opportunity arises, never fail to help others, your country, community, profession, or the planet.

Do these things, and old warriors can rest easy that the better world they left us, is full of better people.

Do these things, and in a few generations, 100 years from now, in a place a few blocks from here, someone will speak of your time and say, “now, they were Giants!”

Thank you

I would like to thank The Honorable Judith Guichon Lieutenant Governor of BC,
for gracing us with her presence and eloquent words at this event. As well, The Surveyor General of BC, Mr. Mike Thompson, for his kind words, and presentation. Bruce Underhill, great as always Mr. Underhill.

To all of our current and former staff, our clients, our suppliers, and fellow surveyors and engineers: We would not be here today without each and every one of you. Thank you for taking the time to join in this celebration with us. Now, everyone please rise, and enjoy the reception.

1. Borrowed from Newton, Hawking, et.al.
2. Martin Luther King