Few people know what they want to be when they grow up. This was not the case for Ken Herbert, who, at the age of 14, decided he wanted to be a power engineer after touring the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) with his Grade 9 class.

“As soon as I entered the power engineering lab at SAIT with the boilers, turbines and associated equipment in full operation, I knew this was going to be my career,” he says.

From there, Herbert followed the technical route through high school to prepare him for his post-secondary education at SAIT. After graduating in 1973, he quickly landed a job as a recovery boiler operator at the Procter & Gamble pulp mill in Grand Prairie, Alta., where he remained for two years.

Herbert then moved back to Edmonton and worked at several different power generation plants. It was here that he learned about the field of facilities maintenance and engineering. Intrigued, he took a position with Public Works Canada (PWC) in 1977, as a mechanical/technical inspector, which involved travelling to various sized federally-owned facilities in the Prairie provinces to perform mechanical inspections and minor renovations, as well as troubleshoot projects.

Unfortunately, three years into his role with PWC, Herbert's department was abolished and absorbed into another. However, as one door closed, another opened. Herbert's then-director, Jim Porter Sr., suggested he’d be an asset in a healthcare facility and recommended him for the position of chief engineer at Edmonton General Hospital. And so began Herbert’s 35-year storied career in the healthcare industry, which involved numerous key positions in three facilities: Edmonton General Hospital (1980-1986), Grey Nuns Community Hospital (1986-2002) and Royal Alexandra Hospital (2002-2015).

“I was 27 years old and had no supervisory experience when I joined Edmonton General Hospital, but Jim must’ve seen something in me,” reflects Herbert, who believes it was his strong work ethic, passion for facilities maintenance and engineering, and ability to effectively interact with others that was behind Porter’s backing.

These traits continued to serve Herbert well throughout his career. From 1986-1988, he was part of the Alberta Urban Hospitals project management team, and played a key role in the construction, inspection, commissioning and turnover of Grey Nuns Community Hospital in Edmonton. In 2002, he accepted the position of project coordinator and manager for the Royal Alexandra Hospital’s $100-million ambulatory care redevelopment project.
“One of my objectives was to bridge the gap between the project management department and the facilities maintenance team,” explains Herbert. “When I first came on-board everything was done through meetings, which hampered the process, so I took it upon myself to meet face-to-face with the construction superintendent every day to find out what was needed.”

Herbert’s ability to establish and maintain solid working relationships on this project garnered him the Capital Health REACH Award for Excellence in Customer Service in 2004. This is one of many accolades Herbert has received, others being the Alberta Health Services Initiative of the Year Award, which he co-won with Ted Haggart in 2012, for the development and start-up of a project coordinator boot camp, and, most recently, the 2017 Hans Burgers Award for Outstanding Contribution to Healthcare Engineering. Presented at this year’s CHES National conference, Herbert says the award is by far his greatest achievement to date.

“I was extremely honoured and proud but also shocked because I had put my healthcare career behind me,” says Herbert, who retired in June 2015 after bouncing back from a serious health scare.

Approximately one year prior, Herbert was diagnosed with an operable brain tumour. Within weeks it was removed and he soon received the good news that it was benign. Still, the experience was life-changing.

“I was sitting in the backyard while on my three-month medical leave and I turned to my wife and said, ‘I could do this every year, have the summer off.’ She replied, ‘Why don’t you?’ And that was that.”

After returning to his position as senior project manager at Royal Alexandra Hospital in September 2014, Herbert busied putting a succession plan in place. Fortunately, his role as past chapter chair of CHES Alberta was coming to an end that fall, so a second succession plan was not needed.

“CHES Alberta was already in good hands,” says Herbert about then-chapter chair Preston Kostura and incoming chair Tom Howard, both of which he encouraged to get involved in the Society.

“It’s such a great organization and it embraces so many in the healthcare industry — consultants, contractors, vendors, frontline staff and, of course, engineers.”

This inclusivity drew Herbert to CHES 25 years ago. At the time, he was a member of the Hospital Engineers Association of Alberta (HEAA). He joined the organization in 1980, and served in the roles of secretary, vice-president and president before ceasing his membership in 2002, when he moved from facilities maintenance engineering to project management.

No longer a member of HEAA, Herbert had more time to volunteer for CHES. Beginning in 2004, he dedicated a decade of service to the Alberta chapter, serving as treasurer, vice-chair, chair and finally past chair. During this time, he was involved in numerous provincial conferences and trade shows, participated in a variety of committees and played a pivotal role in the 2012 merger of HEAA and CHES Alberta, which created one body and voice for those in the province’s healthcare industry.

With his retirement, Herbert’s role in CHES has diminished; however, he’s still a strong proponent of the organization. The same can be said for the field of power engineering. Since taking early retirement in 2015, Herbert has taught future power engineers at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) in a power lab very similar to the one he visited nearly 50 years ago.

“I have a great passion for the profession,” says the now part-time instructor. “It was my first love.”

The second (though of no less importance) is his wife Charmaine, whom he affectionately calls Charlie. The two met at Edmonton General Hospital in 1984, when Herbert was a project/systems supervisor and his now-wife was a nursing administration secretary. They have been married for 33 years, are parents to four sons, three dogs and two cats, and are now grandparents. Their first grandchild was born this past spring — a welcome addition at the many dinners they host.

“Family is very important,” says Herbert, who recently turned 65.

So, too, is two sports teams from Cowtown. Their colours — red, white and black — have donned Herbert’s offices throughout the years and it’s rare to find him not wearing a jersey on game day.