

# MEET HIM AT THE FAIR, ONE MORE TIME



*This Will Be the Last Year for Local Attorney and Devoted Community Volunteer Steve Kuenzel to Serve as Emcee of the Washington Town & Country Fair Queen Contest*

By Karen Cernich

Steven P. Kuenzel Sr. has a love for Washington that runs deep — and long. It began in childhood and has only become more rooted as the years have passed.

A Washington native, Kuenzel is the oldest of three children born to Paul and Shirley Kuenzel. He attended Our Lady of Lourdes Grade School and graduated from Washington High School before earning a law degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law.

As an attorney and managing partner with Eckelkamp and Kuenzel LLP, Kuenzel has continuously looked for ways to give back to the community.

Over the years, he has served on numerous boards and community organizations, including the Greater St. Louis Area Council-Boy Scouts of America, from 1992 to present, and has served as president of just about every civic group he has been involved with:

Washington Ambassadors Club, president, 1998-99; Washington Park Board, president, 1988-97; Washington Area Chamber of Commerce Board, president, 1983-85; Washington Lions Club, president, 1984-85; Washington Jaycees, president, 1978-80; Washington Elks Club; and Washington Knights of Columbus.

Washington Town & Country Fairgoers may recognize Kuenzel more by his voice than anything else, since he has served as emcee of the Fair's queen contest since 1984.

This year will be Kuenzel's 35th and final time serving as emcee. He's decided to walk away from the role that he's held longer than anyone else in the Fair's history, not because he isn't up to the task, but because it's time.

"Thirty-five years is a nice round number, a good time to bow out," he said, noting in recent years he's seen the third generation of queen candidates on stage.

"So I thought maybe it's time to let a younger person take over this job . . . like an athlete — you like to go out on top," he added. "I'm in perfect health, at the top of my game in the legal world. It just seems like it's time to let somebody else carry on the torch."

**OLL Founding Family**  
Kuenzel learned about civic responsibility from his parents, and he hopes he and his wife, Susan, have passed that same lesson on to their son, Steven Jr.

"You have to give back to the community you are in," Kuenzel remarked. "That was always my goal — to leave whatever institution I was involved in better than it was than when I started with them."

Kuenzel's family was a founding member of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in 1958, and

he has been an active member his entire life.

"I can still remember as a kid, 5 years old, Mass was held at the Washington High School gymnasium on Sunday because they were still building the church, which was built to be a multipurpose room," said Kuenzel.

When the OLL School opened in September 1959, Kuenzel was in the second grade. Years later, he sent his son to OLL for grade school, and now his granddaughters are enrolled there.

"I have an incredible fondness for that parish," said Kuenzel.

That's what motivated him to head both the fundraising and building committees when the parish began plans to build the current church.

"It was my parents' dream, as with all of the parishioners who started that parish, to one day build what they called 'a real church,'" said Kuenzel. "For me to have the opportunity to do that back in 1990 while my dad was still alive, although my mom was gone by then, was pretty special to me."

The project was long — 14 years from start to finish, from a blank piece of paper in 1990 to the completed church in 2004.

"If I have anything in my career to be most proud of, that's it," said Kuenzel. "In terms of something that will benefit people in this town long, long after I'm gone. A hundred years from now, that church will still be there.

It's a gorgeous structure, very functional. It was an incredible experience.

"It was carrying the torch for a lot of people who spent their lives putting the school needs over building a church. It turned out to be a really, really special project," he said, one that helped grow both the parish and the school.

**At the Top of His Career**  
Kuenzel received his Bachelor of Science degree in business administration from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1974 and his Juris Doctorate degree from the same institution in 1976.

"I was on a fast track," said Kuenzel. "I did three years of undergrad. In those days, if you got your degree requirements out of the way, you could take 30 hours of electives, so I elected to take them in the law school.

"I didn't have a lot of money in those days, so saving a year of college was a big incentive," he remarked. "I had a plan the day I walked onto campus, and it worked."

At Eckelkamp and Kuenzel LLP, he is a general practitioner attorney, which means he handles a wide variety of cases. He jokes that one law professor has described him as "a dinosaur."



Steve Kuenzel Sr. and his son, Steve Jr.

"You won't find many lawyers who are trial lawyers and also do document preparation, office work and that sort of thing," said Kuenzel. "We do everything from estate planning to contracts, mergers, business deals, divorces, criminal law and we do a lot of civil litigation for banks, insurance companies, larger corporations. It's a diversified practice."

Kuenzel started his career in 1976 with Leo Politte and Sid Thayer, whose firm rapidly became Politte, Thayer and Kuenzel.

"I tried my first jury trial alone five days after they handed me a law license," said Kuenzel.

He credits that ability to the law school, but also to the Eckelkamp brothers, attorneys Bill and L.B., for whom he had clerked.

"I always give credit to Bill Eckelkamp for having taught me how to try lawsuits, and to L.B. Eckelkamp for teaching me politics and how to do the business end of the law deals," said Kuenzel.

Two years after graduating law school, Kuenzel ran for prosecuting attorney. He lost the election, but won a lot of name recognition.

"My name was out there so much that it vaulted my career to a level that's incredible," he said.

Joining the Eckelkamp law firm in the early '80s vaulted it even more. He began there in January 1984.

Looking back over his career as an attorney, Kuenzel named a few big moments: He argued a murder case in Union and was able to get the accused acquitted.

He was the local counsel on a fatal airplane crash suit that resulted in a \$48 million verdict, and was the lead lawyer on two condemnation cases that resulted in large verdicts. Those three results are among the four biggest verdicts in the history of Franklin County, said Kuenzel, proudly.

"Those were big deals . . . but I've also



Steve and Susan Kuenzel with their son and his family.



The Kuenzels have served as co-emcees of the Washington Town & Country Fair Queen Contest for the last several years.

done a lot of big business deals that are not glamorous," he said, noting he enjoys both sides of it.

Being a top attorney demands long hours, but for Kuenzel it never feels like work. He enjoys it that much.

"I work a lot of hours, and it's because I love what I do," he said. "It's a lot of 80-hour weeks from November to May, but it's a demanding business if you want to be good at it."

"I really like what I do, plus I have good clients and a good set of partners. These guys are my friends first and my partners second. It's been a lot of fun along the way."

**Inducted Into American College of Trial Lawyers**

Along with overseeing the OLL new church project years ago, the other accomplishment that Kuenzel is equally as

proud of is one that was bestowed upon him by his peers: being inducted to the American College of Trial Lawyers in spring 2017.

"The American College of Trial Lawyers is an invitation-only fellowship of exceptional trial lawyers of diverse backgrounds from the United States and Canada," the group's website notes.

"The College thoroughly investigates each nominee for admission and selects only those who have demonstrated the very highest standards of trial advocacy, ethical conduct, integrity, professionalism and collegiality."

Kuenzel said there are 140 or fewer members out of the 30,000 lawyers in the state of Missouri.

"It is very difficult to get in," he said. "They interview every lawyer and judge who is still alive that you tried a jury case against, so you have to meet the ethics standards and the abilities and experience and skill level standards."

**'Big Believer in CPR Training'**  
Among the many groups that hold a special place in Kuenzel's heart is the Washington Volunteer Fire Company.

Back in 1991, Kuenzel's father, who worked for many years at the Bank of Washington as head of installment loans, was serving on the Washington City Council when he suffered a heart attack and had his life saved through CPR administered by two Washington firefighters.

"Basically, you have four to six minutes to save someone, and they saved him," said Kuenzel.

It was already a high profile save, since Paul Kuenzel was a city council member, but he also happened to be friends with then-Fire Chief Bill Halmich, who worked alongside him at the Bank of Washington.