

Eckelkamp Kuenzel LLP Marks 35th Anniversary

■ *Oldest Law Firm in Washington*

By Karen Cernich
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Steven P. Kuenzel Sr. credits his mentors, L.B. Eckelkamp Jr. and the late William Eckelkamp, with teaching him how to be a top-rated attorney — Bill taught him about the courtroom and trying cases, and L.B. about the business end of law deals.

Now as managing partner of the law practice he established with the Eckelkamp brothers and a fourth partner, Gael Wood, back in 1984, Kuenzel Sr. is passing on those same lessons to the firm's next generation of attorneys — his son, Steven P. Kuenzel Jr., and Bill's son, William "Billy" Eckelkamp Jr.

"One of the things most firms don't have and that we're kind of proud of is that not quite everyone here, but everyone whose name is Eckelkamp or Kuenzel has been trained by an Eckelkamp or Kuenzel," said Kuenzel Sr., who clerked for the Eckelkamp brothers when he was still in law school.

"I trained under Bill and L.B., and Buzz (Eckelkamp III) and these guys trained under me," he said.

Eckelkamp Kuenzel LLP opened its doors 35 years ago on Jan. 1, 1984, as Eckelkamp, Eckelkamp, Wood and Kuenzel. The office was located on the second floor of the Bank of Washington's main branch on Main Street in Downtown Washington, where it remains.

Over the years, as the bank building was renovated and expanded to meet growing needs, the firm stayed in place.

Today it is the oldest law firm in Washington and the only AV-rated firm in Franklin County. Nearly two years ago, Kuenzel Sr. was inducted into the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers, an honor limited to some 140 of the more than 30,000 Missouri lawyers.

Eckelkamp Kuenzel is a general practice law firm engaged in the practice areas of personal injury, general civil trial practice, estate planning, trusts, DWI, family law, criminal law and corporations and business entities.

At the start of the new year, the firm also began serving as the Franklin County municipal prosecutor, meaning its attorneys handle traffic, planning and zoning and building violations for the county.

Three of the Five Largest Verdicts in Franklin County

When the firm was established in 1984, the only attorneys working there were the four full-time partners, with four staff members to support them. Currently the practice includes seven attorneys (four working full time) and five full-time support staff.

The partners are L.B. Eckelkamp Jr., Steven P. Kuenzel Sr., Louis B. "Buzz" Eckelkamp III and Steven P. Kuenzel Jr. Wood left the practice in 2001 after being elected as a circuit judge in 2000.

Eckelkamp Kuenzel has won a number of big cases over the last three and a half decades, including three of the five largest verdicts in Franklin County:

- A wrongful death case in 2011 stemming from a skydiving plane crash near Sullivan where six of the eight people aboard died. Kuenzel Sr. served as the local attorney with Gary and Anita Robb as the plaintiffs' attorneys.

- The case against Doncasters Inc. resulted in a \$48 million verdict (\$20 million in actual damages and \$28 in punitive damages), which is the third largest in the state's history.

- An eminent domain case in 2011 that pitted the Missouri Department of Transportation against James Krafft. Kuenzel Sr. and Colleen Kuenzel served as the defense attorneys, winning a \$1.2 million jury verdict, with another \$200,000 in accrued interest.

That case is still the largest condemnation verdict in Franklin County history, said Kuenzel Sr.

- A real estate condemnation case in 2016 where Kuenzel Sr. and William Eckelkamp Jr. represented High Plain Land Company against Ameren, which was represented by one of the biggest law firms in St. Louis. The verdict was in excess of \$800,000 with interest.

Kuenzel Sr. pointed out that the firm also has had several defense verdicts, where plaintiffs are seeking a large sum of money, \$1 million or more, but are awarded nothing or significantly less.

"That's a big win for us," said Kuenzel Sr. "It's a big deal when you are defending someone against having to pay \$1 million and they end up not having to pay anything or very little."

Culture of Community Involvement

The attorneys at Eckelkamp Kuenzel said their commit-



Eckelkamp Kuenzel LLP Celebrates Milestone

Eckelkamp Kuenzel LLP is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. The law firm was founded Jan. 1, 1984. Seated, from left, are partners Steven P. Kuenzel Jr.; Steven P. Kuenzel Sr., managing partner; L.B. Eckelkamp Jr. and Louis B. "Buzz" Eckelkamp III. Standing, from left, are Connie F. Rehbein, office manager/legal assistant; Christina Anderson, legal assistant; William W. "Billy" Eckelkamp Jr., associate attorney; Colleen M. Kuenzel, associate attorney; Marilyn A. Koenig, legal assistant; James W. McGettigan Jr., associate attorney; Sheena M. Halmich, legal assistant; and Sarah E. Kappelmann, legal assistant. Missouriian Photo.

ment to the community goes beyond just providing legal services. They grew up here and live here, so they like to contribute to those groups and organizations that make the town a better place for everyone.

"One of the things we take pride in is not only providing good quality advice to our clients at a fair price, but also our involvement in the community," said Kuenzel Sr. "We're all heavily involved in community organizations and charitable organizations."

These include the Boy Scouts of America, Rotary Club, Lions Club, Knights of Columbus, Elks, Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Francis Borgia parishes, to name a few.

"It's a culture that we try to promote," said Kuenzel Sr. "I think we all feel like we have a commitment to the town of Washington. We all try to give back to the community. We've been very blessed to be where we are, and it's not even discussed. It's just who we are. . . . If you have a special talent, you ought to be willing to use it to make the community a better place."

Today, he follows a practice with the firm's younger attorneys that the Eckelkamp brothers followed with him — shadowing.

"You shadow your mentor everywhere," said Kuenzel Sr., noting that means anything from going to a Lions Club meeting to walking a job site. "These guys (Kuenzel Jr. and Eckelkamp Jr.) shadowed me for two summers — they went to every meeting, every client contact, every court appearance."

'Fun Place to Work'

Practicing law is serious business, but the work itself is fun at Eckelkamp Kuenzel, said William Eckelkamp Jr.

"I love being here every day. Some days it's work, but for the most part, it's fun," he said. "I get to do something different every day."

A big part of what makes the job fun is the people he works with. He and Kuenzel Jr. are colleagues, but first and foremost, they're friends, and have been since they were boys.

As the sons of two of the firm's founding partners and just a year apart in age, Eckelkamp and Kuenzel have known each other all their lives. They went to grade school, high school and college together and even pledged the same fraternity.

Now as attorneys, they work closely together, and sometimes that involves a little arguing.

"We like to have our arguments," said Eckelkamp Jr., smiling.

It's all in good fun, but it's also useful in making their cases stronger.

"Steve (Sr.) always says my dad was the best at being able

to tell you what was wrong with your case, and if you can know everything that's wrong with your case, you can prepare for it," said Eckelkamp Jr. "You're going to be in good shape when you get in the courtroom."

Being friends first and partners/colleagues second is exactly the kind of relationship the firm's founding partners all had, said Kuenzel Sr. And they were all better for it.

"That is really important in the field we're in because it is so competitive and some days are very stressful," he said. "We have just been blessed. . . . I would not even consider any disagreements we've had in this firm as arguments, more like top level minds having different opinions."

Looking Ahead to the Future

As the youngest partner in the practice, Kuenzel Jr. admits there is pressure to continue the success of the firm and its top reputation. Looking ahead he knows that will include taking on a bigger workload whenever his father and one of the firm's associate attorneys, James W. McGettigan Jr., decides to retire.

"The goal is to maintain the relationships we have with our clients, but also to grow additional relationships with people and clientele," said Kuenzel Jr. "It's a day at a time because we never know who's coming in the door."

Keeping an excellent support staff has been key to the firm's success thus far and it will be the same in the future, he said.

"It's hard to do in this arena because clients come to us often times on their worst days. . . . things are reactive because something has arisen that necessitated their coming to see us," said Kuenzel Jr. "Sometimes we get to be proactive and plan ahead, but that's often not the case. We have to be reactive. So keeping good staff is important, and they're heavily involved in us being able to do what we do."

Listening to his son talk, Kuenzel Sr. bristles a little at the thought of himself retiring. That isn't going to happen anytime soon, he said.

In fact, the joke at the firm is that when Kuenzel Sr. retires that will mean he only works three days a week, said Eckelkamp Jr., which would drop him down to 60 hours.

"I do get to pick and choose my cases now," said Kuenzel Sr. with a smile. "I couldn't do that 25 years ago."