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CEA LIEUTENANT
GOVERNOR'S AWARD
FOR DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT



PRACTICALLY CIVIL

HERB KUEHNE FORGED A CAREER BASED ON WANTING TO IMPROVE PEOPLE'S EVERYDAY LIVES

WHEN IT COMES TO building and tinkering, Herb Kuehne started early — you could even argue a bit too early.

“When I was 12 years old, we were in the garage, using acetylene, brazing things — we got quite the technical background when we were still pretty young,” Kuehne recalls.

“We” were Kuehne and his brother, under the tutelage of their father, an “exceptional welder who founded a few companies and always came up with innovative ideas and ways to do things.” But the Kuehne kids showed such engineering aptitude that the garage quickly went from a place where father taught sons to a typical shop where a trio of (relative) equals worked on projects as they pleased, so much so that when the brothers Kuehne eventually built their own go-kart, “Dad wasn’t there.”

Dad was there for future chess games, though, and both Kuehne’s parents fostered his curious, technical mind with gifts like a telescope and chemistry set. By the time he approached college age, Kuehne started thinking of engineering as a career. That’s when the family’s resident nuclear engineer stepped in.

“My uncle actually taught nuclear engineering down in the States. And to help me make the decision, I flew down to Kentucky where he set up interviews with a bunch of other pros, in each one of the disciplines, whether it was electrical, mechanical or structural engineering.”

So which discipline did he choose to study at the University of Alberta? “Civil,” he laughs, clarifying that at the time, it just seemed like a good fit. But looking back, he says he enjoyed the practicality of civil engineering, and how it affects so many people’s daily lives.

“I started with Texaco Canada, as a refinery engineer, and it was great. But I wanted to do something different where I did more to improve people’s quality of life, whether it was building roads or improving water quality or needed

infrastructure. So I ended up going to Associated Engineering after about a year at Texaco.”

Of the many life-improving projects Kuehne’s helped construct, he cites the Cold Lake Marina — which was the largest inland marina in Western Canada at the time — and Edmonton’s Fulton Creek Marshland — the city’s first wetland facility — as particularly impactful.

“Today, you see them everywhere, as part of every subdivision, but at the time, people built normal stormwater management ponds,” he says. “That was a pretty neat project, coming up with a concept of getting nature to clean the stormwater that way. Now, it’s taken for granted, but it was unique at the time.”

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As an avid hunter and fisher growing up, Kuehne brought an outdoorsman’s appreciation of nature to his projects. “I love the outdoors, and I was a boater, so for the Cold Lake marina, I wasn’t coming in cold — I knew what was needed for a boating community, like that you don’t just size a marina for the craft that are there at the time, you build for the future. A lot of engineering is common sense.”

Kuehne used his common sense on another fondly recalled project, one that required less engineering, and more of his interpersonal skills. “I like just being able to help clients, and one that made a big difference was helping the city of Fort McMurray overcome some of the huge growth issues they had, by helping

them secure some of the infrastructure funding that they needed from the province to help the community grow.”

As he thinks of how his engineering community grew over the years, Kuehne recalls a behind-the-scenes decision he pushed for as president of Consulting Engineers of Alberta (CEA), back when the industry struggled to hire young engineers. “It was a function of salary,” he explains. “So I was able to get the CEA board to agree that we had to significantly raise the salary of graduate engineers so that we could bring them into our firms. As a result, we were able to attract some of the best and the brightest in our industry, and it had a cascading effect with salaries going up all over the place. It’s important to remember that we’re competitors, but we’re also members, so we’re all in this together.”

Kuehne represented CEA on the board of ACEC, where he also served as Chair, and remembers his contribution as changing the Board governance and having a forward-looking focus on consulting engineering issues.

Looking back on his Lieutenant Governor Award-winning career, which included CEA Merit and Excellence awards, myriad projects, as well as international work in China, Kuehne says that even though members may compete for projects, “a competitor today could be a friend tomorrow,” and while he may have held a leadership position for much of it, he’s been most happy to be part of a team.

“I think a good engineer has to look at the big picture, and be holistic in their approach. I used to always say to people, ‘It’s up to you guys, I’m just the coach in the background helping guide you — you’re the ones that will achieve the success, and you’re the ones that will be recognized for it.’”

– GORY SCHATTEL