

VERNON M. WEGERER
KJWW Engineering Consultants

A Mentor by Design

Standing on Johnston Island Air Force base 950 miles off the coast of Hawaii, Vernon Wegerer was far from his hometown of Cunningham, Kan., and the comforts of everyday living. He joined the United States Air Force in 1957 following high school and a year of studying at Pratt Community College. The military had exposed him to a variety of career opportunities, but four years later he was convinced of the importance of continuing his education. His family had struggled growing up and he believed in the investment education could provide.

Vern graduated with a degree in electrical engineering from Kansas State University in 1965, the first in his family to attend college. He was then hired by Deere & Co. in Moline, earning \$6,500 a year plus benefits. As soon as he started he set some long-term goals. One of those was to earn \$10,000 a year someday.

But even the security of working for a large company left Vern restless and his ambitions soon got the best of him. In 1969 he left Deere and joined a small professional engineering firm in Rock Island as its eighth employee, providing mechanical and electrical consulting services to education, industrial and commercial clients. A year later, his duties were expanded to include project coordination and supervision when he became an official partner under the company name Kimmel-Jensen-Wegerer-Wray (shortened to KJWW in 1973). It had not yet been five years and Vern Wegerer had already made his independent business dream a reality. He attributes this in part to the persevering nature of his father, who taught him that getting what you want means you can never stop working hard.

Vern aimed to pass this lesson on to others around him. As the smallest engineering firm in the Quad Cities, he recalls how rough the competition was for KJWW at the time. The best he had to offer was his experience and strong work ethic, he says, but that proved to be more than enough. In 1980 he was elected Vice President and General Manager of KJWW. By 1984 the firm boasted 24 employees, and that year, Vern was also named President of the company. He dedicated the next nineteen years of his career to improving operations at KJWW and developing their trusted reputation within the industry. During that time, the company welcomed 200 additional employees and added four new branch offices throughout the Midwest. Structural engineering and technology design were also added to their services.

The physical growth of KJWW was not Vern's primary focus, however. Rather, he believed that to expand outside business you had to first start from within. So instead of hiring a group of established engineers, KJWW began recruiting graduates straight out of college who were eager to make their impact. They learned from each other through a peer training process that continues at KJWW today. This team-oriented environment widely supports the one hundred percent employee-owned company. KJWW invests an average of \$2,718 in training annually per employee, and over half the engineering staff has been with the firm their entire career.

Although Vern retired at the end of 2003, his emphasis on continuing education, leadership and a strong work ethic is still a driving force for KJWW's business. The company ranked among the top 15 engineering firms in the U.S. last year, and number one among Mechanical, Electrical, Structural, and Technology firms in the Midwest. With ninety percent of its business from repeat clients, the breadth of KJWW's services remains unparalleled. Approximately 400 employees manage seven branch offices, including one internationally in Ahmadabad, India.

A man of boundless energy and fierce determination, Vern has extended his commitment to improving education far beyond his business innovations. Several institutions including Jordan Catholic School, Pratt

Community College and Kansas State University have all benefited greatly from his time and talents. He has established the Vernon Wegerer Architectural Engineering Scholarship for KSU students and the Family Scholarship Fund for Pratt Community College, while presenting career planning programs to audiences at the University of Iowa and Kansas State. Recognizing firsthand the hardships experienced by underprivileged students, Vern believes deeply in every person's right to receive a quality education.

A degree alone is not everything, however. For it to be useful, Vernon understands the philosophy behind its application is crucial. His interest in giving young engineers the proper tools for their future became instrumental in founding Kansas State University's Architectural Engineering Advisory Board, where he served as Chairman from 1997-2002. He was humbled to be inducted to the KSU Engineering Hall of Fame in 2002 for his dedication to the college and his profession. Prior to this honor, Vern was also named "Outstanding Alumnus" by Pratt Community College in 1995.

Today, Vern continues to be a compassionate advocate for the betterment of his local community. Over twenty years on the American Bank of Rock Island's Board of Trustees has provided strategic planning and financial strength as the bank has grown within the Quad City area. He is also involved with The Development Association of Rock Island (DARI), a seven-year board member for Trinity Medical Center, the president's advisory board member to both Augustana and Black Hawk Colleges, has twenty-plus years with Kiwanis club, is a life member for Knights of Columbus and a council member for the Catholic Diocese of Peoria. In 2003-2004, he received the Community Service Award from the Consulting Engineers Council of Illinois for his tremendous community service initiatives.

While others can learn from his example, Vern says that what inspires him most is the spirit of others themselves. He takes a "Variety is the spice of Life" approach, but particularly enjoys the time he gets to spend with his family. Vern and his wife Loma live in Moline. They have three adult children and eight grandchildren who are all located within a few hours drive of the Quad Cities. Vern insists that to be a well rounded person, you must have four things: a passion, a vision, organization and the support of family and friends. But for those family and friends who know Vern, they might also add that having a good mentor doesn't hurt either.