
'This is payback time'

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DANVILLE — As a first lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force, Julius W. Hegeler II flew 70 combat missions in the Korean War, including the last.

Later, he helped build a company that would become the world's largest contract packager of chemical specialties and one of Vermilion County's largest employers.

But the lifelong Danville resident said his proudest achievement has been donating millions to local entities and projects focusing on education, environmental education, health care, historic preservation, the arts and helping people with disabilities.

His imprint can be seen at Danville Area Community College and Presence United Samaritan Medical Center, the war museum and YMCA, the Danville and Westville libraries and the city and county parks. It can also be seen at Danville Symphony concerts, the hospital foundation's Festival of Trees and the library foundation's Page to Stage events.

His latest gift will help bring [Balloons Over Vermilion \(/news/local/2016-01-26/updated-balloons-officially-coming-back-vermilion-county.html\)](/news/local/2016-01-26/updated-balloons-officially-coming-back-vermilion-county.html) — a new festival featuring hot air balloons, children's activities and other special events — to the Vermilion Regional Airport in July.

"You don't have to drive very far in Vermilion County to see where he has made a significant impact," said DACC Foundation Executive Director Tracy Wahlfeldt.

"His gifts truly affect the whole community," added foundation board president Mary Norenberg, who pointed out they benefit everyone from newborns to seniors.

Now 87, Hegeler and Lois Wise, his companion and secretary/treasurer of his charitable foundation for the last 12 years, recently sat down at his stately, three-story home to talk about his life.

As his five cats roamed in and out of the room, he shared stories about growing up in "the big house" and later restoring all 15,000 square feet and the two-story carriage house on the property. He also spoke about his current mission — "helping Danville."

"Danville has been very good to me," he said. "This is payback time."

Hegeler's grandfather, Julius W. Hegeler, moved to Danville in 1905. He and his brother, Herman, established the Hegeler Brothers Co., later the Hegeler Zinc Co., which put Danville on the map.

As a child, he ate Sunday dinners with his grandfather and grandmother, Josephine, at their home on North Vermilion Street. Although it was during the Great Depression, they dined on roast beef and a variety of vegetables — including the rutabagas Hegeler despised — from his grandmother's garden.

Hegeler was born to Edward C. Hegeler II and Madelle Hegeler on May 9, 1928. He, older brother Edward and young sister Madelle were all born two years apart.

Their home was built in 1911 for A.L. Webster, a wholesale grocer. Hegeler's father purchased the property in 1927.

Built in the neoclassical style, the house features a large two-story foyer and walnut staircase, parlor, study, music room, dining room, butler's pantry, kitchen and three enclosed porches downstairs; five bedrooms and a maid's suite that was converted to an apartment upstairs; a 2,000-square-foot ballroom on the third floor; and a finished basement.

As youngsters, Hegeler and his brother sneaked downstairs during their parents' parties, stood on the staircase and listened to Bobby Short, then a Garfield School student, entertain guests on the baby grand piano. When their folks weren't entertaining, the boys turned the ballroom into a basketball court. Later, their father used it to display a large-scale Lionel model train set, which had 200 feet of double tracks.

"My brother got a freight train, and I got a passenger train," Hegeler recalled.

He doesn't remember much about his father, a Hegeler Zinc salesman. His father divorced his mother and later moved to New York when Hegeler was young.

"We had nothing to do with each other," he said.

Hegeler was raised by his mother and grandmother, Madelle Goodloe. His grandmother was a disciplinarian, and young Hegeler occasionally found himself on her bad side.

Once when he was 8 or 9, she took him to see "All Quiet on the Western Front" at the Fischer Theatre. When he started acting up in the car, she ordered the driver to stop and her grandson to get out.

"I had to walk home. I didn't get to see the movie," he said.

His grandmother also taught him how to play the stock market when he was 15. She learned from her stockbroker father.

"I bought some railroad stock before Warren Buffett did and made some money," he said with a laugh.

Hegeler's interest in the stock market didn't extend to school. "I used to dream in school. That's why I got bad grades," said Hegeler, who used to watch the clock at the old Roselawn School. "When it got close to 3, I ran for the door. I couldn't wait to go outside and play."

When he was 12, his mother gave him an Ithaca double-barrel, 20-gauge shotgun. After school, he hunted for quail in nearby fields until it got dark. A doctor who lived across the street sometimes took him duck hunting early in the morning. He also took him on a couple of pheasant hunting trips to South Dakota.

"Those trips meant a great deal to him," said his oldest daughter, Alix Hegeler. "It was that male-bonding experience that you normally would have with your dad."

Hegeler's interest in academics grew slightly when he entered Danville High and took drafting, mechanical drawing, wood and metalworking classes that allowed him to work with his hands.

"I made a part for my brother's car," he said. "He was missing a part down by the running board. I had to look at the part on the other side, draw it backwards and make the mold. Then we poured the metal."

While manual arts teachers James H. Hawkins and Paul Smoot were his favorite, he said he owes all of them his thanks.

"They allowed me to graduate," he said with a sheepish grin.

He ranked 307 in his Class of 1946's 317 students. But "when it finally came down to it, there were only 307 that graduated."

Hegeler went on to study industrial management at the University of Illinois and serve in the Army National Guard for three years. He transferred to Millikin University his senior year and earned a bachelor's degree in business administration on Aug. 2, 1950.

After graduating, a friend invited Hegeler to stay with his family in Arizona. When he came home two months later, he had a postcard from Uncle Sam waiting for him. It said his draft classification had been changed to 1-A, meaning he was available for unrestricted military service.

"I ran down to the draft board and enlisted in the Air Force," Hegeler recalled. "I'd walked around in the mud enough in the National Guard. I didn't want any more of that."

Instead, Hegeler wanted to fly planes. When he got to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, he applied for the aviation cadets program and entered in July 1951.

He trained in a North American T-6 Texan, flew a T-28 Trojan in advanced training and earned his wings exactly two years after his college graduation. When he got to gunnery school at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, he got to fly an F-86 Sabre, the first U.S. swept-wing fighter introduced to take down the Soviet Union's MiG-15s.

During Hegeler's first training exercise in the desert, his instructor ordered him to climb to 40,000 feet, then dive to 20,000 feet. They broke the sound barrier.

"It scared the hell out of me," he said. "My instructor was flying a separate plane. He was right by my side the whole time."

Soon after, Hegeler got his orders. He arrived in Korea on Christmas Eve 1952.

As a member of the 25th Fighter Interceptor Squadron of the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing based in Suwon, Korea, Hegeler — flying his plane named Madelle — provided air cover for American troops on the ground and battled Chinese, North Korean and Soviet aircraft in the sky during his 11-month tour.

"When we'd have a briefing, I would get scared," he admitted. "Once I was in the plane, and it was cranked up, I was ready to go. (The fear) left me completely."

Hegeler never shot down a plane, but he did damage a MiG-15 that was hot on his element leader's trail.

"He flew right past me, but didn't see me," recalled Hegeler, his leader's wing man. "I hit him because he had fire coming out of his tail."

At the end of the war, Hegeler and a friend, Don McGregor, flipped a coin to decide who would fly the last mission. The loser had to fly to a maintenance base in Japan.

"It was a buffalo nickel," said Hegeler, who won the coin toss and was one of four pilots to fly to P'ongyang.

On the way back from Japan, McGregor's plane engine stopped, and he was forced to eject into the Sea of Japan, where he was picked up by a Japanese fishing boat. His buddy's luck improved. He returned to Las Vegas as an instructor pilot and married Miss Nevada, who was a runner-up in the Miss America Pageant.

For his service, Hegeler was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, an Air Medal with an Oak Leaf Cluster and other medals. After the war, he served at Craig Air Force Base in Alabama and the old Chanute base in Rantoul.

In 1955, Hegeler returned to Danville. He, his lawyer brother, Continental Filling president Harry Peterson and two others founded the Peterson Filling and Packaging Co., later known as Peterson/Puritan. At one time, the company had 1,000 employees and ran three shifts.

"We filled aerosol cans with bug spray, hair spray, deodorant, car wax, you name it," said Hegeler, who ran the production plant and designed and oversaw the construction of three additions.

When the company was sold to Corn Products Co. in 1966, Hegeler served as vice president of facilities planning until he retired in 1978. Today, the site is occupied by KIK Corp.

On Christmas Eve 1955, Hegeler ran into a woman he'd known since childhood at the old Elks Club. Three years his senior, Bobette Steely had moved east to attend the College of William & Mary. After graduating, she worked at a Washington, D.C. bookstore.

"I said, 'Well, do you want to go south?'" he said, explaining that meant visiting a few taverns south of Danville. She agreed, even though she had a boyfriend. A week later, all three ended up at the same New Year's Eve party.

"Someone blew the whistle, and I leaned over and kissed her," Hegeler said.

The couple got engaged the following April and married at Bobette's parents' home in Danville on June 9, 1956. They settled into a small house on Poland Road and later a Tudor-style house on Logan Avenue, where they raised their children — Alix, Harlin and Madelle.

Despite her dad's aversion to school, Alix said he instilled in her the value of education.

"It came before everything else," said Alix, a visual arts instructor at Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts.

She also credits her father — who stoked the coal furnace before school and worked four jobs in high school — with giving her a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility.

"We always had to do chores on Saturdays," Alix said.

Sundays were another matter. In the summer, the family grabbed a bucket of chicken and their neighbors, took their "float boat" out on Lake Vermilion and visited friends who lived on the lake.

When Bobette died of ovarian cancer in 1976, Hegeler was left to raise the kids on his own.

"He did an amazing job," said Alix, who remains close with her dad. The two talk on the phone every Sunday, and she visits him in the summer.

Hegeler moved back to his childhood home after his brother's death in 1985. Seven years later, he placed 90 percent of his fortune — inherited from his mother and made from selling his company and other investments — into the Julius W. Hegeler II Foundation.

He established it in part to fully restore the house and turn it into a museum. The restoration, which is still ongoing, included replastering ceilings and walls, refinishing the floors, tuck-pointing the four brick chimneys and installing new plumbing and electrical systems. One of the biggest tasks — done by former employee Jay Richie and current employee Phyllis Rice — involved stripping and refurbishing all of the woodwork to its original state.

When his mother lived in the house, the shellac on the woodwork turned black, Hegeler said. "Back then, they didn't know what else to do but paint it, so my mother painted all of the woodwork white."

Today, Rice's son, Tony, is refurbishing part of the basement. Longtime staffer Steve French maintains the property and grounds.

Occasionally, Hegeler opens his home to the public for housewalk fundraisers. Visitors can wander through the formal rooms, furnished with period furniture and antique fixtures and decorated with family heirlooms, paintings and photographs. His old flight jacket and well-worn boots, the first Hegeler Zinc slab poured in 1906, his brother's law office shingle and some of his mother's tennis trophies are on display in the parlor, called "the memorabilia room."

"He's a collector," Wise said.

These days, Hegeler spends his mornings sitting on a comfy sofa on the south porch — his three newspapers and small spray water bottle to squirt the cats if they "try to get fresh" close at hand. In the afternoon, he moves to an armchair in the memorabilia room to watch back-to-back episodes of "Gunsmoke."

"He also likes the financial news," said close friend Frank Brunacci. He and his wife are one of seven or eight couples who take turns driving Hegeler and Wise to the Danville Country Club for supper on Wednesday evenings.

"We pick him up at 6 o'clock and not a minute before," Brunacci said with a laugh. "If we're there early, we're going to wait. He's just a stickler on that."

A few years ago, Hegeler stopped flying his twin-engine Beechcraft Baron. More recently, he stopped driving and started using a walker.

But his philanthropic work — the other reason he started his foundation — has only picked up speed. In the last few years, he's given away more than \$10 million, including planned gifts of \$3 million-plus to DACC, \$3 million to the hospital and \$1 million to the Danville Public School Foundation. In each case, it was the foundation's largest single donation.

Alice Jacobs, DACC's president, and Ken Konsis, the Vermilion County Conservation District's executive director, said many of the projects that Hegeler funded came about from running into him at a community event or while socializing. He got straight to the point and asked, "What do you need?"

"He's definitely made this a much more beautiful campus," Jacobs said, pointing to the Garden Gateway, greenhouse and a marble bench memorializing instructor Mary Coffman.

When it comes to giving, Hegeler said he's always followed his mother's advice: "She said people give money to people, not to causes." He's opened his checkbook to people like Jacobs, Konsis, Bob Richard of the Danville Public School Foundation and others whom he trusts to do "good things" with his money.

While the Hegeler name is now featured prominently on DACC's tech center addition, the hospital's cancer center and the library's outdoor stage, among other places, Hegeler said he's never given a dime for the recognition. While those contributions and others may be his legacy, he hopes to be remembered simply as "someone who loved Danville."

Family ties

Julius Hegeler and his grandfather were both named after his great-great-grandfather Julius Weisbach, a noted professor of applied mathematics and mine machinery and surveying in Freiberg, Germany. Weisbach wrote influential books on mechanical engineering, refined the Darcy-Weisbach equation; and was an elected member of the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences.

At age 22, Hegeler's paternal great-grandfather, Edward C. Hegeler, and F.W. Matthiessen, a fellow student at the School of Mines in Freiberg, came to the U.S., took over an idle zinc factory in Pennsylvania and became pioneers in the manufacturing of spelter. They later moved to LaSalle and started the Matthiessen and Hegeler Zinc Works, which became one of the most modernly-equipped smelters in the Midwest.

Hegeler's other great-great-grandfather was Henry J. Lyons, a stockbroker from Louisville, Ky. His firm, Henry J. Lyons & Co., became Hilliard Lyons, one of the oldest investment firms in the U.S. and the largest west of the Alleghenies.

The patron saint of Danville

The Julius W. Hegeler II Foundation's most recent gifts:

A planned gift of upwards of \$3 million for the Julius W. Hegeler II Advanced Technology Center addition at the Harry J. Braun Technology Center at Danville Area Community College

A \$3 million planned gift to Presence United Samaritans Medical Center's cancer center, renamed the Bobette Steely Hegeler Cancer Care Center

A \$1 million planned gift to the Danville Public School Foundation

A \$600,000 personal donation for the Environmental Education Center at Kennekuk County Park

A \$500,000 gift for improvements at the Danville Family YMCA

A five-year gift totaling \$100,000 for the Balloons Over Vermilion event at the Vermilion Regional Airport

A \$40,000 gift for the Hegeler Stage at the Danville Public Library

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