

BackTalk Global Reach

Koch Enterprises President Bob Koch

By Jane McManus • Photo by Paul Van Hoy

Bob Koch, president of Koch Enterprises, is a lot like the unassuming building on Evansville's near West Side that houses the offices of the international holding company.

On the outside, there is only a small bronze plaque to designate the location of the 13th largest privately held company for 2004 revenues in the state.

Inside, the walls are lined with original artwork by American and European artists including T.C. Steele's, "Last Hour of the Day."

Koch Enterprises was begun by Koch's great-grandfather, George Koch, who came to the United States from Germany when he was 5 years old. The elder Koch started the company in 1873, making metal household objects, such as washtubs and cooking utensils.

Today Koch Enterprises, still headquartered in Evansville, is composed of seven subsidiaries, with operations in four different countries.

On Sept. 15, Bob Koch will speak to the Institute for Global Enterprise in Indiana, which is affiliated with the University of Evansville's School of Business Administration. To register, call 488-2455.

You have said in the past it is very important for Evansville businesses to have a heightened global awareness. Why?

It is very, very difficult, but I think in the long run for business to succeed it has to go international. The growth in the U.S. has already slowed. The opportunities are in other parts of the world where progress lags way behind the United States.

What have you found to be the greatest challenge in dealing internationally?

Culture, I suppose, is key. Learning the new rules and laws. In Asia, it's simply making phone calls. They're awake while we're asleep and we're awake while they're asleep.

You have a beautiful collection of art throughout this building. How did you start collecting?

My Uncle Malcolm, who was at the company for a lot of years, was always interested in art, active in the museum. And I always liked the art he had collected throughout the office. So to learn more about it, I asked (Evansville Museum of Arts, History and Science Executive

Director) John Streetman and the museum to help me. And he did. He got me started, gave me some guidance, kind of launched me into it. Now I'm out on my own.

In addition to being president of Koch Enterprises, you are also president of the Evansville Signature School. You've made it clear that one of the big priorities for Evansville needs to be more of an emphasis on education. Why is that so important?

Let me say it a little bit differently. I think you want to get better academic results.

When you say better academic results, what results do you mean?

I think we want to prepare the K-12 students for college and the really highly demanding universities.

The days are gone when you can just simply be an arms and legs (at a job) and leave your mind at the door. For a company to be successful today, it needs the input and thoughts and creativity and problem solving of everybody on the team.

Those communities that generate a higher amount of patents or innovations, compared to other communities, have higher standards of living, more sound and stronger economies.

Do you think Evansville needs to do a better job of attracting high-tech businesses?

Sure. But in order to do that you need a workforce that's capable of providing the knowledgeable workers that are required for a sophisticated tech company to exist. Those manual jobs that companies relied on in the past are being performed in Mexico or China at substantially lower wages. So those jobs are migrating away from here. And if that's all we're prepared to do, we'll have high unemployment.

What would you like to pass along to your (four) children?

To try to help make the world a little bit better than they found it when they got here. To have fun doing it.

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