

McKeens Help Build Community

By Janet Murphy

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Nancy and Kim McKeen have been named the 2020 Citizens of the Year by the Chilton Chamber of Commerce. The McKeens are the owners of Farm & Home Hardware and Garden Center in Chilton. Janet Murphy photo

Farm & Home owners Kim and Nancy McKeen were recently chosen as the Chilton Chamber of Commerce 2020 Citizens of the Year.

Having moved to Chilton in 1996 to buy the store with Dwight and Colleen Bloohm, Kim's sister and brother-in-law, Kim and Nancy have had the hardware business as part of their life story for a long time.

A 1973 graduate of Burlington High School, Kim said he went into retail right out of school, taking a job at the Burlington Ace Hardware store in southern Wisconsin. Similarly, Nancy started out at the Antioch Ace Hardware store, just across the border in Illinois, after she graduated in 1977. As it turned out, Kim had taken a transfer from the Burlington store to the Antioch location prior to Nancy being hired, and he was her boss when their relationship started to click.

Nancy said she didn't share her mother's concerns at the time that she might lose her job if things didn't go well dating Kim, because, as she told her mom, hardware was not her life. In retrospect, she had to admit, "Hardware turned out to be my life!" Nancy said she and Kim were married less than a year later, and they made their home in Burlington. Meanwhile, Kim changed direction in his career path for a bit, with a move into sales.

Kim said he left retail and worked for Elkhorn Chemical in Elkhorn for seven years, but admitted he did not care for it, stating, "I missed the personal contact with people." Then Kim was contacted by Jim Keegan, who had been the director of operations for the Ace Hardware chain that Kim and Nancy worked for and had become director of operations for the Farm & Home chain, about coming to work for him.

Thus began Kim's career managing Farm & Home stores around the state, starting out in Waupun in 1988, followed by moves to Shawano, New Richmond, and finally Chilton in 1996. Nancy said that was when the Farm & Home chain dispersed the stores and allowed their managers to buy them. Kim said he and Dwight decided to take the opportunity to buy the store that Dwight and Colleen had been managing.

Kim said, "At that time, we had Ben Franklin Crafts, which was a huge category, and Dwight was the craft guy, so we just figured we'd make a good team, with me doing hardware and him doing the craft portion of the store." The Bloohms retired in 2016 and sold their half to Kim and Nancy so they could carry on the business.

Solving problems

In describing why he likes being in the hardware business, Kim stated, "I think of hardware as being in the problem-solving business. I like fixing things, I like tinkering, and I like helping people solve their problems. They've got the same kind of problems we have."

When asked about his vision statement for the business, Kim said, "I've got it on every red sign in the store, 'Farm & Home is here to help.'" While he admits he may not always be able to compete with the bigger box stores when it comes to special prices, he feels he and his staff can offer advice about projects and information about products that you don't necessarily get with the bigger chains.

Kim gave an example of a couple that came in earlier in the day that was looking for a 3-inch valve. He said, "Well, a typical hardware store stops at a two-inch valve. I said, 'A plumbing contractor would have that—I can check with Karls Mechanical.' I said, 'I'll phone down there and find out for you.'" Kim said Karls had the valve the couple needed, so he sent them down the road. He said he tries to help out the customer the best he can. "The way I looked at it was, he still shopped Chilton. He still stayed local."

Regarding challenges in his field, Kim said he feels that his biggest challenge is how drastically the business has been changing. He said, "Where it used to be a store like us, in years gone by, we were a one-stop shopping store. You know, you got everything here. I remember when I first got here, a third of the store was clothing. After that, a third of the store was crafts and so forth. You're constantly racing to keep current with what's changing out there. Now, the hardware portion of the store, thank goodness, is the stable part of the store. There's always nuts and bolts and nails, but this is a big building that we need to fill with something, so you're constantly challenged to keep relevant."

Kim and Nancy both expressed their concerns for the future of Farm & Home. Kim said, "We've got 24 years, Nancy and I, in this community and in this store, so I think our heart is here. And we spend more time here in this store with these people than we do with our own families, to the point that this is our family. So, we care about these people, and we care about the community and the future of the business."

When considering who he would like to acknowledge in light of this recognition, Kim said, "For me personally, I thank Nancy before anybody. We've been together 41 years and virtually all that time, she's been my partner, through the thick and thin, and there have been some rough years, thin years, but Nancy has always been part of this."

Children play key role

Kim and Nancy thanked their children, Justin, Jared, Jamie, and Jordan, who are all in their 30s now, for enduring a lot of moving to different towns and houses over the years. Kim recalled his daughter, Jamie, having an assignment in first grade to show her teacher a picture of the house

she lived in previously, "and she went to school with six pictures, and she was 6 years old! Our family bounced around a lot until we found Chilton as our home, so I think my greatest thank you has to go to them."

Kim and Nancy also said they were very grateful to those who nominated them for the award, and felt deeply touched and honored to be recognized. Kim added, "Of course, it goes without saying, we appreciate the Chamber. Without them, this never would have happened." Kim, who has served as Chamber president two times over the years, currently serves on the board.

Nancy thanked the people in the community for all their support as well. She said, "Actually, this whole town is just a wonderful community to live and work in. I guess I can't say enough about that. It's really a great place to live."

Kim and Nancy further expressed their appreciation for the small-town life Chilton offers, how the community feels safe, and how they find it comforting that neighbors know one another. Kim remembered back when Nancy slipped in the parking lot and ended up breaking her ankle a few years after they had moved here, and people brought food to the house and to the store.

Kim continued, "One guy made a Christmas tree ornament. He brought it to the store and said, 'This is for the lady that fell and broke her ankle, this isn't for the store, this is for that lady.' And we still have it to this day. We still use it!" Nancy added, "Just the love and the outpouring here, you know, you just can't beat it."

The Chilton Chamber will hold a recognition banquet for the McKeens at the Eagles Club on Wednesday, March 25 at 6 p. m., and tickets can be purchased at area banks.