

FACES OF THE COMMUNITY

Yearning for roots inspires Schwenk to roll up his shirtsleeves

By Tedra Meyer
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This is the first installment of a new feature in the Tri-Cities Area Journal of Business. Each month, we will profile a local business leader who influences the community at large through his or her volunteer or civic efforts. If you know someone who inspires by example, please send your suggestion to editor@tcjob.com.

At a recent dinner for the Washington State University Tri-Cities Advisory Council, chancellor Vicky Carwein thanked the outgoing chair and introduced the new one. It was old news to most of the people in the room—only one showed great surprise on her face.

Until that moment, Sharon Schwenk hadn't been informed that her husband would be adding another leadership role to his list of ongoing volunteer projects. Not only that, but he was transitioning from vice chair to chair of an organization he had already chaired once before.

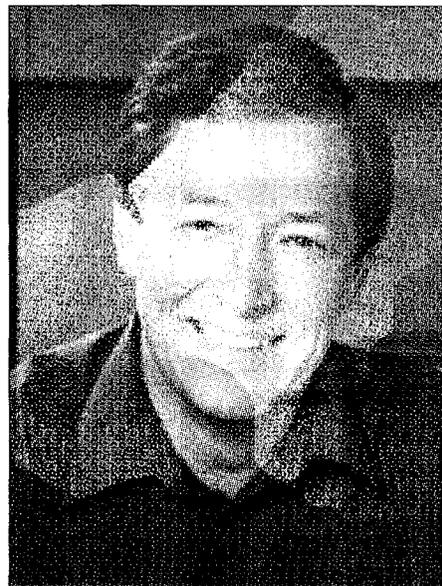
"It's become a joke in our house," explained Mike Schwenk of his innumerable civic roles. "We're better off not talking about it. My wife's great about it, though."

An engineer by training, Mike Schwenk is widely known throughout the community as the vice president and director of commercial partnerships at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory—a job he calls "the best in the Tri-Cities." But for an average of one hour every day, he's working on some other nonprofit or community project, and he's become known by many as a visionary—the kind who often sees his so-called unrealistic ideas become reality.

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A list of his past roles includes the taskforce that first suggested a WSU branch campus in the Tri-Cities, executive vice president of the Tri-City Development Council (alongside the late Sam Volpentest), Washington Export Council, Washington Technology Center (two governor-appointed terms), Three Rivers Cultural Coalition and the Boy Scouts—to name just a fraction.

Schwenk admitted he has a hard time saying "no," but he also said he donates his time and energy for selfish reasons. "I was raised in a military family, so we moved every two to three years. I never



out and get involved."

The Schwenks moved to the Tri-Cities from Maryland in 1979, when Sharon was pregnant with their first child. They've stayed ever since, and they have no plans to leave. "When we came here, our decision was, we're going to stay," he said. (Ironically, Schwenk took a job at then Hanford contractor Rockwell because, he said, "I couldn't even get an interview at Battelle." He had a job offer at Battelle's Ohio campus, "but we didn't want to live there," he added.)

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It was the early 1980s when Schwenk volunteered for the first time, on what was then called the Tri-City Chamber Education Committee. A neighbor of his at the time, Jay Clemens, was the president of the chamber, and recommended he get involved. This soon led to the creation of the Tri-City Chamber Higher Education Task Force, where he began to meet the real movers and shakers in the community, he said.

He remembers first suggesting that the Tri-Cities needed a research university associated with either WSU or the University of Washington. It was 1983, and there was no such thing as a branch campus in the state. Of course it seemed impossible at the time, he admitted. But, one of Schwenk's personal philosophies is not to get trapped by conventionalities.

When Sam Smith became president of WSU, he brought with him knowledge of branch campuses from the Penn State University system, and it was only a matter of time before Schwenk and other Tri-Citians were lobbying the newly formed Higher Education Coordinating Board. WSU Tri-Cities became one of the first three branch campuses in the state, and is now a four-year university.

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In addition to the WSU Tri-Cities Advisory Council, the 55-year-old Richland resident currently chairs the TRIDEC board and Three Rivers Community Roundtable, while sitting on the Tri-City Education Advisory Council, Three Rivers Community Foundation board, United Way Community Solutions Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel, U.S. Bank Regional Advisory Board and a handful

of other organizations, including the Tri-City Development Council (alongside the late Sam Volpentest), Washington Export Council, Washington Technology Center (two governor-appointed terms), Three Rivers Cultural Coalition and the Boy Scouts—to name just a fraction.

Schwenk admitted he has a hard time saying “no,” but he also said he donates his time and energy for selfish reasons. “I was raised in a military family, so we moved every two to three years. I never felt like I had any roots,” he said.

In contrast, his wife, Sharon, was born and raised in Lewiston, Idaho. “I saw in her and her family the exact opposite of what I had experienced,” he said. “They had deeper relationships and a feeling of being a part of a community. I wanted those things. I wanted people you could call when you needed something. I had to create that environment, so I had to go

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Jim Toomey, executive director of the Port of Pasco, has known Schwenk since they worked together at Rockwell in the early 1980s, and their paths have crossed numerous times since then—most recently on the Three Rivers Community Roundtable. Toomey puts Schwenk in the same category as some of the Tri-Cities’ historically most influential leaders, such as PNNL’s Bill Wiley.

“The thing that always amazed me about Mike is he is always listening, and he’s extremely good in a group. Whether it’s a small or a large group, he always seems to push things from behind the scenes, so that in the end, he gets people on the same page,” Toomey said, adding that somehow he does this without being manipulative or bull-headed.

“I’ve never seen him force people in a direction they don’t want to go. His strength as a leader is that he’s inclusive of ideas and personalities,” Toomey said. “He’s very bright and articulate. And at the end of whatever process, everyone’s going to walk out of the room and think they’re in a better place, thanks to Mike. He gets them to the next level.”

TRIDEC office administrator Jane Foreman, who worked for Schwenk when he was president of TRIDEC from 1985 to 1990 and now considers him a friend, said his strengths as a leader is his ability to look at both sides of an issue, see the big picture and eloquently express them. “He seems to always be capable of giving an instant recap of the pros and cons of a particular issue—that has always amazed me,” she said.

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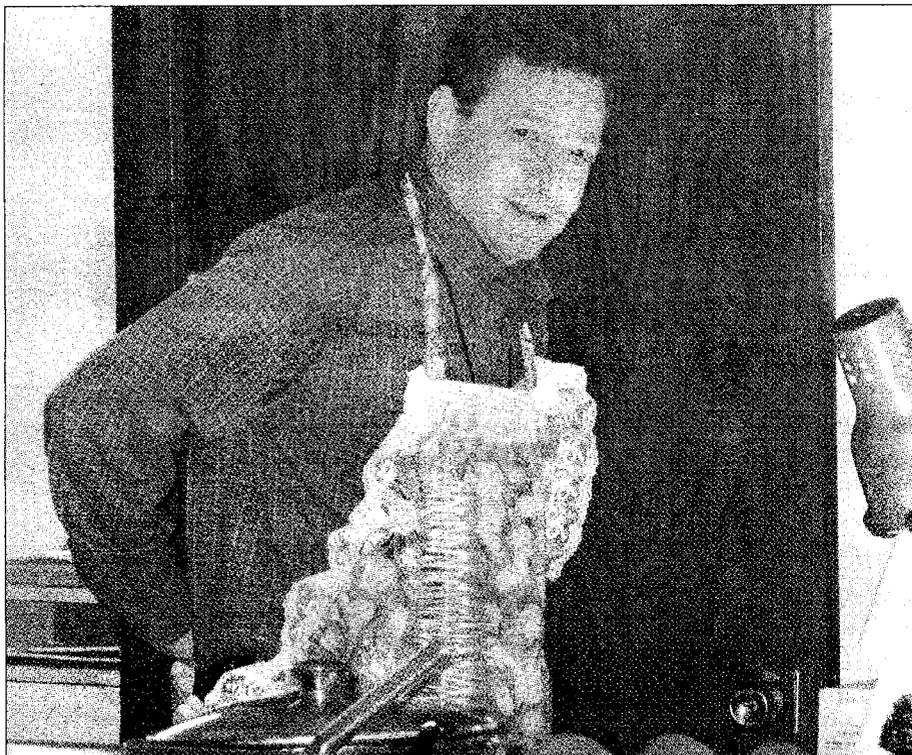
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Another accomplishment that Schwenk is particularly proud of is the The Columbia River Exhibition of History, Science, and Technology. When he worked for Westinghouse, he oversaw what was then the Hanford Science Center, which was located in part of Richland’s Federal Building. Because of the “if it’s not clean-up, then don’t do it” mentality, he was involved in privatizing that institution and making it into a nonprofit entity; moving the FFTF visitors center into town; and then combining them in a new location.

“I don’t know if we would have envisioned it to be what The Reach interpretive center has become, if it hadn’t been for [privatizing it],” he said. “You don’t know what path these things will take.”

But he hasn’t won all his battles. When asked if there have been any disappointments in his civic efforts, he pointed to the abandoned Fast Flux Test Facility and Fuels & Materials Examination Facility and the incomplete Columbia Basin Project, which he’s worked on through TRIDEC. The Columbia Basin Project proposed delivering full water supply to about 1.1 million acres in central Washington, of which about 500,000 acres are still not irrigated, he said.



The PNNL VP dons an apron before serving staff members at a holiday lunch in December.