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PBJ Interview

Ken Austin on a life inventing everything from prison locks to Benny Beaver

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It's hard to know where to begin when noting the contributions to Oregon of Ken Austin. The 86 year old co-founded the largest privately owned dental equipment manufacturing company in the United States, A-dec Inc., which today employs 1,200 in Newberg and has offices around the globe. He was the creator of the Oregon State University mascot Benny Beaver, and has invented industry-transforming products that are still in use today. He is also a generous philanthropist, a tradition that was started by his late wife, Joan, who passed away in 2013.



CATHY CHENEY
Ken Austin, 86

On Monday, Austin will announce an effort in partnership with the Oregon Community Foundation that will continue and enhance that giving for decades to come. In advance of that announcement, we spoke with Austin about growing up on a farm in Newberg, his life as a tinkerer and how he came up with the concept for Benny Beaver.

In addition to being an entrepreneur, you have invented several products over the years. To what do you attribute your curious mind? I don't know if it came from genetics, but certainly it came from my environment. I grew up on a farm as an only child and I had to entertain myself during the hours while mom and dad were out in the field. I had an imaginary workforce, I pretended I was a farmer and had a hired hand. Without having neighbors or brothers or sisters, my time was spent by myself. Which was a negative because I was full of myself when I went to high school.

You have quite a car collection. Have you always loved cars? I was a car nut in high school. I had a shop and was working on other kids' cars when I was 14. I got my drivers permit to drive to school at 14. I went to Oregon State with cars on my mind. I made parts as a freshman and built a hotrod for myself. The theme is around that old shop and those old cars. I have 1903 Ford that was the 625th car that Ford built. My third car was a Rose Festival theme car in 1950. There's a purpose behind every car.

You've referred to yourself as an imagineer. Can you share an example of imagineering? Well, they wanted a better lock in the prison system. The penitentiary had to be able to let everyone out of their cells in case of an emergency. It was done by having a cable running to each door and then a big wheel that was the winch, which the guards would turn to pull the cables on everybody's doors simultaneously. So when the state was building a new women's penitentiary in Pendleton, I was asked if I could take my idea for air operated door

locks to the penitentiary. The imagineering was how could you make an unlocking device operated by air. It took awhile to do it, but I kept thinking about it and took the working of a padlock and put it into a lock with an air cylinder. Today, almost all prisons are controlled by air operated locks from my patent.

Do you still tinker today? Not like I used to.

Do you miss it? A little bit, But I'm enjoying couch time and football.

You have a long history with OSU. In fact, you were the creator of the school's mascot, Benny Beaver. How did that come about? There was a tryout for yell leader. We had one man and four girls who would make up the yell team at OSU in the 1950s. A fraternity brother of mine was going to try out and I went along. In the interview, my fraternity brother suggested that OSU should have a mascot like the (University of California, Berkeley) had Oski the bear. Stanford had an indian, the Ducks had a duck on a string, the Huskies had a dog. So he was selected for the yell team because of that proposal. He told me on the walk back to the fraternity house that he was picked because he proposed a student mascot.

So you took that and came up with Benny? I did and I was Benny for the football season in 1952. I finished with classes in '53. It was a papier-mache head and I covered it with brown shag rug to make it look like fur. I have no idea what happened to the uniform. I left it with the college, and we're recreating it for OSU's 150th anniversary.

How did you come up with the idea for Benny? I grew up near the St. Paul Rodeo and I thought (Benny) could be like a rodeo clown and entertain the audience during timeouts or a lull. I had no guidance on what to do and the school newspaper wrote: 'Who is the student who dresses like a beaver but acts like a jackass?'

What do you like to do when you're not watching football? I like to help people in need. I'm a recovering alcoholic and I'll drop a hat to help anybody. I spend a lot of hours visiting with people, mentoring, talking about ideas. I like to talk to people and help them more than anything.

How do you think your own experience as an alcoholic has influenced your desire to help others? I think it's huge. Because I realize that we are very simple people on earth and part of our responsibility is to help others and share with other people. Growing up in the Depression, people shared with their neighbors. I have also become more humble as a result of it, and I certainly hope I'm not as full of myself as I was when I was a practicing alcoholic. The fact that I became powerless is how I got rid of the alcoholism. Once I admitted I was powerless, my whole life changed.

How so? The answer is simple, I joined AA to get sober and I found God. I don't know how that writes up in stories, but that's my story.

CLOSER LOOK

KEN AUSTIN

Title: Founder of dental equipment maker A-dec

Education: Graduated from Oregon State University in 1953 with a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering

Military: Second lieutenant in the Air Force

Professional: Co-founder, with Joan Austin, of dental equipment maker A-dec, Inc.

Born: Missoula, Montana

Raised: Newberg

Family: Wife, Joan (deceased); daughter, Loni Parrish; son, Ken Austin III; 5 grandchildren; 5 great grandchildren

Suzanne Stevens

Editor

Portland Business Journal

