

2024

Jackie Wengert Memorial

BUSINESS & CITIZEN

OF THE YEAR



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CITIZEN, BUSINESS OF THE YEAR AWARDS

named after JACKIE WENGERT

By Justin Hotop
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The late Jackie Wengert could never technically win the "Republic-Monitor Citizen of the Year" because for a long time she was the Executive Director of the Perryville Area Chamber of Commerce. After her death in 2023, Wengert was named an "honorary citizen of the year" as well as both awards will be named after her going forward and will be called the Jackie Wengert Memorial Business and Citizen of the Year awards.

"She was always going," Renee Lottes said in 2023. "She was always doing this or that. It was like she had the energy of a 10-year-old. She loved this community and would do anything to make it a better place."

Wengert passed away suddenly on March 2, 2023 after retiring from the Chamber of Commerce the previous June after four years. It wasn't the first time that Wengert stepped away from the position as she was the executive director from 1999-2005. When the position became available again in 2018, she jumped at the chance to lead the Chamber of Commerce for a second time.

"I loved working for the Chamber," Wengert said before retiring. "To be honest, I was working out of town back then and the work was in a cubicle in an office and I just missed the people. I missed communicating with the businesses and I was

at one of those times in my life when I felt like I would love to get back with the Chamber again."

Along with being the director of the Chamber, Wengert submitted MCB books each year and attended the Missouri Community Betterment Conferences in Jefferson City, was the head of the Perryville Mayfest Committee, organized Moonlight Madness on the Square, served on the Perry County Community Rodeo Committee, organized Shop Local Campaigns, organized many membership meetings, ribbon cuttings, business after hours, coffee and connections and power hours to bring businesses together to network and support one another, along with many other smaller things she did that often went unnoticed.

Diane Kohm and Perry County School District 32 were named the Citizen and Business of the Year in 2023, the first year for the memorial awards. Wengert's values will guide future candidates going forward.

Jackie Wengert



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MUELLER honored as CITIZEN OF THE YEAR

By Justin Hotop
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What started out as a part-time job has turned into decades of service to others. It is for that service and her dedication to the Perry County Senior Center that Eileen Mueller was named the Republic-Monitor's Jackie Wengert Memorial Citizen of the Year.

"It's an honor to even be thought of in that way," Mueller said. "It was certainly a surprise when I was told that I received the honor."

Mueller does just about everything at the senior center — from accounting, serving as head of the handling of food, leading the prayer every day, filling in for the center's Meals on Wheels program when a driver is needed, helping in the kitchen, and serving as the as-

sistant to senior center administrator Jennifer Freeman.

In short, she does it all.

Mueller started out nearly three decades ago at the Senior Center as a part-time worker, washing dishes in the kitchen, and as time went on, she gradually transitioned to other duties.

"Like with anything that you have to



learn on a daily basis, you get thrown into it and have to adapt and step up," Mueller said. "I care for the people I work with and if they need help and there is no one else around, you just try your best and solve the problem at hand."

Mueller has been with the Perry County Senior Center for 27 years, and while she does a lot for the center, it's the people draw her back to work every day.

"I don't just have to sit here behind a desk every day," Mueller said. "It's a variety of different things I'm able to do, in part because I've been here so long. However, the seniors and helping them is what I love about working here. The ability to talk with them and ask them how their day is going or what is going on in their life."

Eileen Mueller



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Freeman has seen that love for the people she interacts with everyday first hand for the past four years.

"She is a familiar face that seniors look forward to seeing each day," Freeman wrote in her nomination letter. "She knows everyone by name and greets everyone with a smile. In the four years I have worked with Eileen, I have witnessed her unconditional love for her job and the people she serves. Not only does she lend a listening ear, but offers hugs and prayers to anyone that needs it. She can recognize when a senior is feeling down and will jump up to ease and comfort someone who needs it. Some seniors come to the Senior Center just for the fact that they can get one-on-one interaction with another human being."

Not only is Eileen an asset to the Senior Center, but also serves her family consisting of nine living siblings. She plays an important role in the lives of the countless nieces and nephews and now, grand-nieces and grand-nephews.

"Having that big of a family wasn't that bad," she said. "Being the second to last child many of my brothers and sisters, many of them had moved out year after year. At one time, we probably had as many as seven kids living at home at one time. We had to always help each other out around the house and otherwise."

Mueller is a life-long Perryville resident and has seen things change for the better in the area. There are even people Mueller has known all her life that pass through the Senior Center.

"Things have expanded over time here in Perryville," Mueller said. "I love being from here and the memories that I have had from my childhood and the way things used to be. Some of the city workers that come in here and recognize me and we have a conversation. We all change so much that when you haven't seen some people in many years, you have to catch up sometimes."

Eileen is active in her church and is always offering to give spiritual support. She loves with her baking

and cooking and is always sharing her bounty. She belongs to the St. Joseph Church in Highland, where she takes care of the shrine and cleans the church buildings on a regular basis.

"My dad donated money to have the shrine built there," Mueller said. "It has to have some sort of upkeep and we donate our time and help the church in that way."

Mueller may feel like she doesn't too much in the way to earn an award, but her friends and family certainly do.

"Eileen is kind, loving, nurturing, generous, and lives with her heart. This community is lucky to have her." Freeman said.



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VILLAINOUS GROUNDS

honored as BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

By Justin Hotop
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Many people in Perryville and Perry County like to start their day with a drink or have a morning pick-me-up. What better place than your friendly neighborhood coffee shop?

Eight years ago, the husband-and-wife team of David and Mary Jo Bammel set out to fill that role, along with a few others — local comic book store and artisan craft dealer among them — providing a high level of customer service. In recognition of their efforts, along with their many efforts to help the community, Villainous Grounds has been named the Perry County Republic-Monitor's 2024 Jackie Wengert Memorial Business of the Year.

The Bammels were beyond ecstatic to receive the award.

"We were not expecting this at all," said Mary Jo. "It feels wonderful to be acknowledged, but we don't do this to get honors and awards. We do this to be a part of people's day, and that's probably the number one reason we do this. We enjoy helping out in the community any way that we can. We feel very blessed."

Both David and Mary Jo worked in customer service before opening the coffee shop and sat through countless meetings constantly reminding them to take care of the customer. Despite that, they felt like they were never allowed to do so because they were always dealing with the corporate side of the business



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world.

When it came down to making decisions, they were always forced to contact headquarters to make sure they were able to do certain things.

"We wanted to have the freedom be able to take care of the customer the way we wanted to," said Mary Jo. "We have a natural love of coffee, reading and books. It seemed like a good pairing to open the coffee shop and the comic books together."

From there, Villainous Grounds was born.

The shop was the first of its kind in Perryville when it opened on 26 N. Jackson Street.

"There was one before we moved here, but it closed," she said. "Otherwise, you had your diners, gas stations that served coffee. To my knowledge we are also the only coffee roaster in the area."

Since then, they have been changing non-coffee drinker's minds ever since.

"Before we opened here, I had a co-worker ask me why we wanted to open a coffee shop because she said that coffee was not good," Bammel said. "She said if it was that good to make her something. I did and now she's a regular. It's being able to find a coffee that tastes good and then customizing it to that specific person's needs."

The Bammels and the coffee shop has been around for eight years now, and Mary Jo said the comic book portion of the business is a niche market, but one that is always growing in the area.

"We have some customers that come from long distances like Sikeston and oth-



ers parts of the state and even Illinois," she said. "It's a popular medium, but we have noticed that people who buy comic books use them to help their children learn to read. It gives them a boost because they can actually look through the pages and have a visual and it gets them interested in reading. Many of them have gone on to buy chapter books and improve their reading skills. Comic books are a great way to visualize the story and see what is happening in a book."

The shop also features the Mad Hatters Tea Room, where people can sit and relax, have a conversation or read the various comic books they purchase.

"At first we thought it was going to be a lot of walk-in traffic," she said. "Mostly it is a subscription and pull list, where people will ask us to order books for them."

Not only does Villainous Grounds help people quench their thirst, but also helps those in the community.

The business has partnered with the Heroes for Kids organization and helps host an annual comic con each year. Heroes for Kids, a 501(c)(3) fundraising organization, will host its fifth annual event July 20-21, expanding to a two-day event for the first time.

The convention started as a smaller event, but as the years have passed, it has grown. That was never more evident than in 2023. The event, held at the Perry Park Center, along with other fundraising events over the previous six months, raised \$11,000 — a new record for the event — which was split between Le Bonheur Children's Hospital and Fly Me Home.

"I've been a fan of Villainous Grounds from the beginning," wrote Heroes for Kids Comic Con organizer Lonnie Johnson, who serves as a deputy with the Perry County Sheriff's Office, in his nomination letter. "From my first knock on the door eight years ago and hearing through the paper covering the windows, 'Mary Jo,



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the police are here' to the care they take in concocting every deliciously villainous flavor for their 'Drink of the Week,' along with all the coffee, shakes, smoothies, teas, the awesome aroma of coffee beans being roasted to comics and the Villainous Bizarre Crafts and Art. They always make every customer feel at home when they walk through the door, whether it is their first time visiting or one of their many regulars."

Johnson, who was honored as the Republic-Monitor's Citizen of the Year in 2021, went on to praise the Bammels' service to the community.

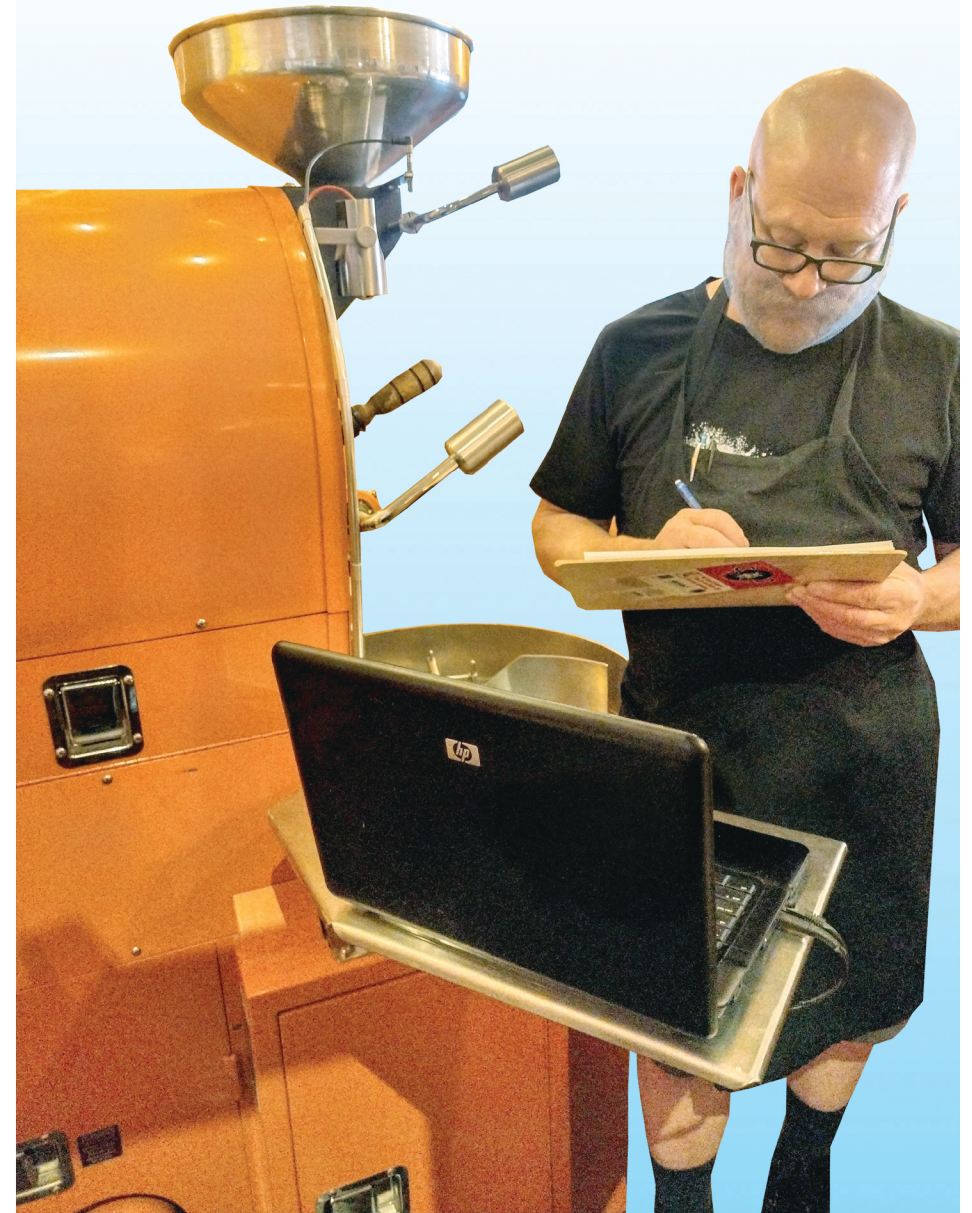
"I should also mention the countless hours of volunteer work they do throughout the community of Perryville with the Chamber of Commerce and other businesses, along with becoming partners with a crazy charity group called Heroes for Kids and helping bring a shared dream of a comic con to life."

Attendance at last year's one-day event was estimated at more than 1,200 people.

"Heroes for Kids started about the same time we did and its leader is a comic book enthusiast," Bammel said. "They wanted to start a comic con and that was something we had discussed as well. Working together was a natural fit. We enjoy working with them and raising money for the various charities that they support. They are Heroes for Kids and we are Villainous Grounds. It's basically heroes and villains working together for a common cause."

Helping people brings joy to the Bammels.

"It's what we are here for," Bammel said. "Whether that's bridging gaps in reading, in community involvement and getting more people interested in what other people are doing. That's the real joy. Getting an award is an honor, but helping someone, no matter what is it, is the greatest honor we could ever have."



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