



## The Oregonian

### Joan Austin brings a quiet boom to Newberg

Development - A-dec's soft-spoken co-founder is determined to leave a legacy in Yamhill County

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NEWBERG -- Joan Austin's soft, almost whispery voice begs listeners to lean in close. Anything from a ringing telephone to the muffled shuffling of papers can drown her out.

But talk with those who know her, review her 40-year record as one of the state's most generous philanthropists and accomplished businesswomen, or scan details of her multimillion-dollar plan to christen Newberg as the gateway to Oregon's wine country, and two words stand out in bold relief.

Passion and dreams.

"I'm a very private person," Austin said during a recent interview. "But when you have passion for a project, you're eager to talk about it."

And not just talk about it, but take charge. She's lead developer for Springbrook Properties, a big residential, commercial and tourism-related project she calls her legacy to Yamhill County and Oregon.

"You'll never see Joan's picture on a billboard like Gert Boyle at Columbia Sportswear," said Ken Austin, Joan's husband of 53 years and founding partner in A-dec, the Newberg-based company they've grown into the world's largest manufacturer of dental chairs and accessories. "But if you want something done right, there's no one else in the world you'd want in charge."

By the time many people hit 75, they are ready to take life a little easier. Joan Austin, barely slowed by open-heart surgery this summer, has logged endless hours the past year hand-selecting the high-powered development group she's supervising in reshaping a sizable portion of her fast-growing hometown.

"Initially, I thought we would have to hold Joan's hand," said Mimi Doukas, director of land-use planning with WRG Design, the firm helping master-plan Springbrook Properties. "Boy was I wrong. We had to go back to the drawing board several times before she was satisfied."

Springbrook Properties, at 433 acres and 1,261 housing units, is more than twice the size of Hillsboro's award-winning Orenco Station and only slightly smaller than the Villebois housing development in Wilsonville. Land-use experts call it the biggest proposed development inside the city limits of any municipality in Oregon.

The project's crown jewel will be the first true destination-quality hotel to be built in Yamhill County, the heart of Oregon's \$1 billion wine industry.

"We've dreamed of this for years and years," Austin said, a smile spreading across a face framed by a cloud of snow-white hair. "We'll give it all we have."

Asked why she's so confident she can pull it all off, she narrowed her eyes, softened her voice even more and replied, "Because I'm tough."

#### The A-dec way

A-dec, now a \$250 million business empire with nearly 1,000 employees and sales in more than 100 countries, began with a single air-powered hand tool that Ken Austin, the company's self-styled "imagineer,"

fashioned in his spare time. The piece, perfected in 1964, revolutionized dentistry, rendering much larger belt-driven electric units obsolete.

It also got Austin fired. His bosses, just like managers at the six previous jobs he had been fired from after his 1954 graduation from Oregon State University, expected him merely to refine what was in use at the time.

When he stubbornly placed innovation over the status quo, they showed him the door.

"Let's just say that my beliefs didn't necessarily mesh with theirs," Austin said, chuckling. "But that's where the entrepreneurial spirit kicks in. If you follow your dreams and your passion, it's all up to you whether you make it or break it."

So Ken, with his new hand piece, and Joan, with five years' experience in the insurance industry,, started their own company. As soon as dentists got a look at the product, sales exploded.

That was in the mid-1960s, when the entirety of A-dec fit snugly into a 400-square-foot Quonset hut in downtown Newberg. The company now occupies 700,000 square feet in the city's historic Springbrook area.

"In my wildest dreams, I never thought this is where we would end up," Austin said. "It's almost like someone else must have done this."

Nearly 40 patents later, A-dec is still going strong.

Joan Austin, A-dec's executive vice president and treasurer, tends to the company's human side. She knows employees by name and sends each a handwritten birthday card.

When she refurbished her parents' house a decade ago and turned it into a company meeting facility, she vacuumed the place, set out fresh-cut flowers and invited every employee over for home-baked cookies.

"There are folks who live on the mixture of dreams and passion, but they don't often have that third element of common business sense to realize those dreams," said Sonja Haugen, longtime general manager of Austin Industries, the umbrella company for all Austin family enterprises. "Both Ken and Joan are unique in that way. They've got all three."

### **History of giving**

Neither Joan nor Ken Austin came from anything resembling wealth.

Ken grew up on a Yamhill County dairy farm, where from an early age he was encouraged to pursue his love of tearing apart everything from watches to lawn mowers.

Joan, born in Minnesota, started school at age 4 because her older sister needed someone to shepherd her through first grade.

"From an early age, she was pushed to the front by her family to be the responsible one," Haugen said. "She's still filling that role today."

As A-dec's revenues have grown, so have the Austins' charitable donations. Their gifts of millions over the years were recognized earlier this month, when they received the Vollum Award for Lifetime Philanthropic Achievement from the Oregon chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Requests for donations are always measured against a multistep test: Does the request relate to dentistry? Is it within a 30-mile radius of Newberg? Is it educational? Will it better children's lives?

The Austins didn't, for instance, simply donate money to OSU, where Ken Austin was the university's first "Benny Beaver" mascot. Instead, they donated \$4 million to create both OSU's Austin Family Business Program, which supports the needs of family businesses, and the Austin Entrepreneurship Program, an undergraduate business program that prepares students to launch their first ventures.

There are other gifts, similarly leveraged, as well.

Some years ago, Joan Austin realized that A-dec's employees and their families couldn't all afford the time and expense of driving to Portland to hear the Oregon Symphony. A subsequent Austin family contribution

came with the stipulation that the symphony perform an annual free concert at George Fox University in Newberg. A-dec employees and families, along with George Fox faculty and staff, get first seating.

And when she started contemplating the health of her company's workers, she got involved with what used to be the Newberg Community Hospital. She helped lead the effort to raise money for a new facility, which opened last year as Providence Newberg Hospital.

"Joan is making sure that her employees have what they need in terms of health care," said Shari Scales, hospital foundation director. "What drives her is what's good for Newberg."

### **Springbrook Properties**

The idea to develop their extensive tracts of land came to Joan more than 20 years ago. She went so far as to get permits for an upscale hotel on a scenic piece of land on the lower flanks of the Chehalem Mountains before shelving the idea.

About a year ago, seeing the piecemeal residential development reshaping much of Newberg's northwest quadrant, she revisited the idea.

"If we want good planning for our community," she said, "it only makes sense that we do it right ourselves."

She didn't stop with housing. A destination hotel was still very much on her mind, surrounded by a village center of small shops and space for artists. Open space, walking trails and new parks are also included.

"This will provide Newberg with vitality for years to come," Joan said.

Completion of the 85-room luxury hotel, scheduled for sometime in 2009, closes a circle of sorts. Ken's great-grandfather once operated what was, at the time, Newberg's only hotel.

"By the time this is done, Joan will leave a footprint very similar to Salishan Lodge or Skamania Lodge," Ken said. "It will be great for our community, great for wine country and great for the state."

Gert Boyle, another accomplished Oregon businesswoman, agreed.

"As far as I'm concerned, Joan has put Newberg on the map," Boyle said. "That's a pretty amazing thing to do for the place you call home."

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