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**BOB KIERLIN** 1939-2025

# Fastenal co-founder was frugal, generous

Story by TREY MEWES • Photo by JEFF WHEELER • The Minnesota Star Tribune

Bob Kierlin's frugality was legendary — he bought suits secondhand, never drove a fancy car and even built his own basement wine cabinet one weekend, though he could have certainly afforded to have it built for him.

Kierlin never forgot his roots or his community, even after he expanded a supply store into a Fortune 500 company in Winona, Minn.

He donated to many Winona-area

causes over the years, from supplying classrooms to creating the Minnesota Marine Art Museum and an upcoming performance center. At the same time, Kierlin famously skimmed on his own pay and found as many ways as possible to stretch a dollar while he was CEO of Fastenal, the global industrial supplier he started with four friends in 1967.

"We've never really cared how

everybody else does things or tried to follow them," Kierlin told the Wall Street Journal in 1997. "We've found that hard work and good thinking have led to the best possible results."

Kierlin died this week at 85, according to community leaders.

"Bob really had his hand in quite a few different things in our community," Winona Mayor Scott Sherman said.

Born in 1939, Kierlin grew up in Winona and graduated from Cotter High School. He later earned a bachelor's degree in engineering and a master's in business administration from the University of Minnesota.

He had an idea early on to sell fasteners as cheaply as possible by cutting out middlemen but couldn't secure investors to support his idea.

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Bob Kierlin, who helped start Fastenal in Winona and turned it into a Fortune 500 company, took pride in his status as Minnesota's lowest-paid CEO.



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He banded together with Steve Slagie, Jack Remick, Van McConnon and later Mike Gostomski to form Fastenal out of his father's former hardware store.

It took time to enlarge the company – Fastenal didn't become publicly traded until 1987 – but Kierlin refused to increase his own paycheck as Fastenal was expanding to more than 25 countries.

Kierlin reveled in his status as Minnesota's lowest-paid CEO, taking home about \$120,000 annually in the 1990s and leaving Fastenal's top job in 2002 with a \$61,000 salary as he worked as a paid legislator. He remained on Fastenal's board until 2014. He cultivated a reputation for spending as little as possible, driving to conferences instead of flying and routinely refusing raises.

Today, Fastenal employs more than 23,000 people worldwide and a couple thousand in Winona.

Fastenal officials declined to comment on Kierlin's passing, a spokesperson said Tuesday.

Aiming to bring more frugality to state government, Kierlin ran for a Minnesota Senate seat and won. He served from 1999 to 2007.

The Republican wasn't afraid to reach across the aisle. Former DFL Rep. Gene Pelowski of Winona remembers Kierlin's generosity in supporting the Winona Model Legislature, an annual learning retreat where students simulate being in the Legislature and create their own bills. Pelowski has helped run the conference for almost 50 years.

Kierlin emailed Pelowski in 2001 to express admiration for how well the students did.

"The bills replicate what the actual Legislature considers with near perfect accuracy," Kierlin wrote. "Have

you ever considered inviting newly elected state legislators to sit in as a learning experience for the real thing?"

Dave Senjem, the former Republican Senate majority leader, sat next to Kierlin during Senjem's first four years in the Senate. He remembers Kierlin as a warm, good-natured man who commanded attention during the rare times he spoke.

"When Bob would take the microphone and in his very gentle sort of

way get up and want to say something, the whole room would stop," Senjem said. "That wasn't the case for the rest of us."

Kierlin was just as frugal in the Senate as he was in his business. He had a small flip phone with only about 60 minutes of talk time a month, Senjem recalled, and Kierlin made sure every minute counted. He'd speak to his wife, Mary Burrichter, on the phone for seven or eight seconds, telling her the day was done and that he was driv-

ing back home soon before snapping the phone shut.

"He was determined he was going to live within his 60 minutes," Senjem said with a laugh. "It's like he couldn't afford to go over time."

Among Kierlin's most visible gifts to Winona was the initial art and funds he and Burrichter donated to create the Minnesota Marine Art Museum, a highly regarded visual arts venue. Kierlin sought to build a collection that melded Winona's history on the

water with the maritime art movement, and establish the museum as a Midwestern attraction for art lovers across the country.

His vision paid off, according to museum director Scott Pollock. About 80% of its visitors come from outside southeastern Minnesota.

Kierlin “knew the power that arts could play in a community,” Pollock said. “We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for his contributions.”

Pelowski recalled Kierlin dazzling members of the Minnesota House after a mini-session in 2019 with a museum tour.

“I heard about it literally for years afterwards,” Pelowski said. “It’s something you’d expect in Chicago or New York or L.A., and here it is in Winona.”

Kierlin was also the driving force behind Masterpiece Hall, a performing arts center featuring gallery space and a concert hall. The hall is expected to open late this year, or possibly into 2026.

“Bob was the perfect blend, if you will, of greatness and goodness,” Senjem said. “He was always giving back to his community, just wanting it to be a special place. He would talk about that a lot.”

Kierlin lived just as frugally after he left Fastenal, still driving an older car and jogging around his neighborhood when he could, counting squirrels and rabbits along the way to keep himself occupied.

In a 2022 video for Fastenal, he discussed his career and his leadership philosophy, expressing gratitude for the company’s growth from simple ideas to a powerhouse for the community.

“I have said that one possibility for my gravestone is, ‘I’d rather be at Fastenal,’” Kierlin said with a smile.





File photo by REGENE RADNIECKI • The Minnesota Star Tribune

Bob Kierlin, left, with fellow Fastenal co-founder Stephen Slaggie in 1990. Kierlin also served as a state senator from 1999 to 2007. "Bob was the perfect blend, if you will, of greatness and goodness," former Sen. Dave Senjem said.



Fastenal co-founder and former CEO Bob Kierlin, shown in 2013, and his wife, Mary Burrichter, donated the initial art and funding to create the Minnesota Marine Art Museum in Winona. He's pictured in the vault of the museum. (David Brewster/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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