St. Louis Character
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Rudi Roeslein

Rudi Roeslein says he majored in soccer while attending Saint Louis University and minored in engineering.

“But somehow I managed to scrape out a career,” he said.

And quite an impressive one at that. Roeslein launched Roeslein Associates, which designs and builds manufacturing systems, in 1990. The company, including its Integrated Manufacturing Technologies subsidiary based in Red Bud, Ill., now has more than 200 employees and expects to reach $120 million in revenue this year. Roeslein grew up in south St. Louis, after immigrating here from Austria with his parents in 1956. “I really have lived the American dream in being able to start on my own and build a business and see that business flourish to where it is today,” Roeslein said.

In recent years, Roeslein, 64, also has been pursuing a different kind of dream — focused on prairie and wildlife restoration. Roeslein believes solutions can be developed to promote better farming techniques and better uses of what he classifies as “marginal land,” land that doesn’t live up to current agricultural production standards. He is putting together a team from the University of Missouri, the University of Minnesota, the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to brainstorm these solutions. The group, which has yet to be named, will meet for the first time in January in Madison, Wis.

Roeslein, who was recently named the Prairie Landowner of the Year by the Missouri Prairie Foundation, already is putting some of the practices he's proposing to use on the two farms he owns in Missouri — a 1,600-acre farm in Putnam County and a 750-acre farm in Osage County, where he's restoring prairieland and building up streams and watersheds.

“What we have we hope is a model that can demonstrate that these practices provide a more economic return than some of the things that are currently being used,” Roeslein said.

Earlier this year, Roeslein launched another business division called Roeslein Alternative Energy to bring together his business acumen and his passion for conservation.

“I really see the potential for taking my knowledge about integrating all sorts of entities into a successful business venture and then turning that into something that might help nature and agriculture,” he said.

Roeslein, 64, and his wife have three adult children and eight grandchildren.

Tell me about the launch of Roeslein Associates.

As a young man I worked for an engineering group within a can manufacturing company called Container Corp. We designed and built our own machinery, and we were charged then after we built it to install it in our own facilities, and sometimes that was painful. So, I convinced that company to employ some modular concepts for those systems. These modular concepts really led to a spark of an idea for a business. I saw construction activities in underdeveloped countries where we could use these modular concepts and then ship them all over the world. So I started a business in 1990 based primarily on that concept — where I would build entire systems using the infrastructure of the St. Louis area and the Midwestern region and our wonderful labor force and then put them into sea containers and ship them throughout the world. We’ve been to 40 different countries in the last 22 years.
What piqued your interest in wildlife and conservation?

I grew up in South City in St. Anthony’s parish. I used to roam up and down the riverfront with a Wham-O sling shot shooting things. It made my parents crazy. I’d roam around the neighborhood shooting starlings and birds and some other things I probably shouldn’t have been shooting. So my dad had a friend that was a doctor, and he had no children, so he started taking me hunting. I used to go hunting for deer in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Some of the biggest deer that I’ve ever seen lived in that habitat, and they had these giant racks. I thought how could that be. I believed that these prairie land grasses and flowers and legumes on these prairies have root systems that are like 12 or 15 feet deep and they extract a lot of nutrients. I think the deer living off those nutrients grow very, very big. So it was a very selfish interest to begin with. I wanted deer with really big racks. But it really grew from that to an interest in the species and their welfare. I’ve had this dichotomy between loving the animals that I hunt and wanting them to perpetuate and be there. You go through this evolution of thinking where the more important thing is how do you advance wildlife and you realize that it’s primarily through habitat. Without habitat these things can’t exist.

What were some of the influences on your thoughts about conservation?

I’ve always been an apostle of Aldo Leopold and his “Sand County Almanac,” which really is the beginning of modern day conservation thinking. It really emphasizes that land is something that should be treated as we treat its people — as an entity that we have to learn to live with differently than we do today.

How did you bring together this group of experts and institutions to consider potential conservation solutions?

I happened to be working with somebody from Fish and Wildlife, and I gave him this vision I had for creating biomass and by creating biomass, creating a value for marginal land. So we started on my property. Then he went to his superiors and said — what if we could do something like this on more than just a small regional basis but on a Midwestern basis, so that started spreading the seed. I don’t profess to have all the answers, but I have a lot of these questions and I have a lot of these passions, so I wanted to bring all of these people together to say potentially there are solutions. One of the solutions I see is a European model where they use manure and they put it into these huge digesters and naturally bugs in nature eat the manure and make methane, which can be used for fuel. This is methane that normally went into the air, and reducing the amount of methane that goes into the atmosphere is also good. Creating a value system that enhances the surrounding area, makes production of our food sources more economical and has a huge impact on the environment around it.

It sounds like you’re always thinking.

It’s hard to sleep sometimes. My dad is still alive, he’s 86. He told me a long time ago — you’re going to realize there aren’t enough years in a lifetime to do what you want to do. So there is this exponential rush to do what you want to do as you get older. I always tell people — you only have one battery, and that battery only has so much charge.

How do you recharge?

My wife and I love to hike. We have a place out in Breckenridge, Colo., and we hike quite a bit out there because it reminds me of my homeland in Austria where I was born. We spend quite a bit of time — probably four or five weeks out of the summer — in Breckenridge just hiking and enjoying wildlife. As a younger guy, I used to be involved in sports quite a bit. I played soccer in college. I competed in triathlons until I was almost 42 years old. I never did a full Iron Man, but I did a lot of the minis up until my early 40s, then business got so demanding that I couldn’t keep up with it.

What they say:

“He has always been a man of integrity. He is straightforward in his undying support for his family, his business and his community and he does not forget those who have supported him through the good years as well as the bad. Rudi — to quote Louis L’Amour — is a man to ride the river with.”

- Brian Cook, retired general manager of engineering and operation, Ball Corp.
“He not only has worked tirelessly to learn about and execute prairie restoration efforts on his own land, but he also understands the connections between land health, ecological productivity and environmental services, and how they are essential for sustainable economies.”

- Carol Davit, executive director, Missouri Prairie Foundation

“I find Rudi to be an extremely passionate businessman, and one who can balance those traits with the understanding of the appreciation of others’ thoughts and goals.”

- Tony Grandinetti, retired vice president of engineering, Ball Corp.