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JOHN KETZENBERGER

Enterprising businessman knows no borders

John Mundell nodded across the office toward one of his mentors, John Welch.

"I never saw myself as a business owner," Mundell said. "I was just an environmental engineer and consultant to other companies."

That was 10 years ago. Today, 17 people work at environmental consulting firm Mundell & Associates, which had \$4 million in annual revenue last year and now does business in South America.

"He's the one who got me excited about starting my own business," Mundell said.

Welch, 71, has that effect on a lot of people. Tonight the World Trade Club of Indiana will recognize him as its Global Business Person of the Year.

It's a fitting tribute for Welch, who established a joint venture with a Bulgarian company to make and sell violins in 1988. Indianapolis-based Consort International was a pioneer in establishing business relations between Communist Eastern Europe and the United States.

Welch credits two early experiences that later helped him found an international business with an 11 percent net profit. The classically trained pianist from Winnetka, Ill., got a stint at 16 as a trombonist touring Europe with a USO show. When he returned to New York City, he began to play gigs with legendary jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker.

As a result, he said, "I always felt very comfortable anywhere in the world. That made it possible to see business opportunities."

Welch later did promotions work for Down Beat magazine, was assistant general manager of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and was an executive in music publishing before starting Consort. He moved to Lebanon, Ind., in 1974 to work for a friend's music publishing firm.

At every stop he has touched others. In Chicago, he co-founded the Community Music Foundation that rehabbed old instruments and provided lessons to kids who lived in public housing. He remembers three kids he instructed from the notorious Cabrini-Green housing project.

"I'd drive them home in my Karmann Ghia, and they'd pile out of the car with their instruments and feel like kings," he said. "One of them became a musician in the National Symphony Orchestra."

Now Welch preaches globalism from the perspective of an international business owner. Consort has a dozen employees in Sofia, Bulgaria, most of whom are experienced craftsmen who transform choice Balkan wood into about 350 violins, violas and cellos each year. Those instruments are flown to Indianapolis, where they are finished by a trio of craftsmen in a building behind St. Mary's Catholic Church Downtown.

Those Sofia violins are shipped to about 30 licensed dealers across the globe. The instruments, destined for use by professionals, teachers and advanced students, sell for \$2,000 to \$8,000.

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One of these days, Welch says, "I'll figure out what I'm going to do when I grow up."

That's a healthy attitude for a guy looking to exit his company in a couple of years. Whatever he does next, you can be sure it will have an international angle. And you can be sure he will be encouraging others to do the same.

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