



HENRY GIESSENBIER, JR.

Founder, U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce

In the Exhibition Hall at The U.S. Jaycees War Memorial Headquarters stands a bronze bust of a man known as Henry Giessenbier, Jr.

The two-foot, copper-colored statue is but a small reminder of the valiant man "Hy" Giessenbier was. He was known for his persevering character. He was driven by a desire to conquer the impossible. Giessenbier's pursuit of success was not marred by selfishness, however. It was enhanced by his determination to serve others and his community.

Giessenbier's desire to serve others began as a dream. Hy envisioned young men participating in the civic affairs of their communities to help and benefit people of all ages. This vision eventually gave birth to one of the world's strongest organizations--Jaycees.

Although distinguished for his strength and character, what is known about Hy's childhood is that he was born on June 26, 1892, and was raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Henry was one of six children in the Giessenbier family. His father was a stern, yet kind German immigrant. Hy's mother was highly respected for her gentle and kindhearted nature.

The Giessenbier family was typical of most middle-income families in St. Louis during the early 1900s. Though they were never poor, Hy began working at an early age. He never completed high school, and just how far his education progressed beyond that is uncertain.

In 1909, Giessenbier entered the field of banking, which eventually became his life's vocation. His beginning years in banking were devoted to intense study of the profession. He often stayed at the bank until the early morning hours studying bookkeeping and other subjects.

At the age of eighteen, Giessenbier started the Herculeaneum Dance Club (in 1910). Though this young leader originally formulated the group for social reasons, in 1915 it became the Young Men's Progressive Civic Association (YMPCA). This forerunner of the Jaycees organization was a step beyond dancing and was directed at the involvement of young men in civic and community affairs. A few years later, the organization's name was changed to the Junior Citizens. (The first time "JC's" came into use.) The organization became the Junior Chamber of Commerce after its affiliation with the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce in 1918.

The Jaycees founder's dedication to serve others wasn't limited to the organization. Hy's patriotism led him to serve two years in the army during World War 1. In a letter sent home, the young sergeant described the war conditions. At one point, Henry described passing a comrade taking cover in a shell hole during intense artillery fire. The other man urged Giessenbier to take cover also, but as Hy related, "something urged me on." A few moments later, that shell hole received another direct hit. Giessenbier's persistence had saved his life.

After his stint in the army, Hy fully resumed his involvement with the Junior Chamber. In the summer of 1920, at the first national convention, the organization officially became The U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce (USJCC). Giessenbier was elected as the first president. His vision for the USJCC was expressed when he said ". . . may I say that in your hands lies the destiny of a great organization. Let us build it to national recognition. Let us organize it in the interest of young men for a greater America."

Besides his participation in the Jaycees, Henry exerted himself and his leadership abilities in other organizations and clubs. Among many activities, he started an advertising club and an avidly pursued affection for speaking. Giessenbier's success was not limited to extracurricular activities. Hy was also becoming a prominent banker. (An uncommon occurrence for young men during that time in history.)

Despite good-fortune in his career and activities, Hy's subservient nature pervaded. Some attributed Hy's disposition to his religious convictions. His wife, whom he had met during WWI and married in 1922, once described Giessenbier as a man who daily read the Bible. And as Hy told his wife on one occasion: "Not to do so would be like going into battle without my armor."

Hy's strong, gentle nature impressed all who met him. George Wilson, Hy's successful political opponent in the 1921 USJCC presidential election, said of him ". . . your sterling qualities place you in the lead wherever you go."

Henry Giessenbier had always been plagued by health problems, and by 1930 they began to take their toll. Even after several operations Henry continued his vigorous lifestyle until disaster struck in 1933. Giessenbier was charged with mishandling funds and illegal transactions at the bank.

For a man dedicated to public service, the event was devastating both mentally and physically. The case was dropped after it was shown the losses resulted from the depression. But even though Hy was acquitted and recovered from his breakdown, the event shadowed his life like a dark cloud.

Less than a year after the court hearing, Henry Giessenbier died of kidney complications. It was November 7, 1935. John Armbruster, another pioneer member of the USJCC, eulogized Henry: "He knew glory and he knew adversity, but he treated them both alike. He was not spoiled by glory nor was he embittered by adversity. His was a life that knew no resentment though he was persecuted far beyond any . . . "

The statue is only a small representation of a man. Henry Giessenbier's personal qualities shall forever be reflected in the organization he founded.

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