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Santa's daughter shares story

By **JANUARY WETZEL**

Pat Koch knows a thing or two about Christmas. That's only to be expected when you live in a town called Santa Claus and you own a business called Holiday World. "When I was a kid my dad dressed up as Santa," Koch said. "But the thing is, he didn't just play Santa, he was Santa, for me and for many other people."

Koch visited Seymour Wednesday as the final guest speaker for 2005 in Leadership Jackson County's Distinguished Speaker Series.

But Koch also knows something about people and business and how they are most often intertwined. More than 50 local business, government and community leaders attended the luncheon to not only hear Koch speak about her life and ambitions, but to give their support to Jackson County's youth leadership program, YoJACK. Fees and donations collected during the speakers' series go to fund the program.

YoJACK provides leadership training and activities for 40 seventh-grade students from all Jackson County schools every year. The program is in its sixth year. "Both students and adult volunteers look forward to this program each year," said Nita Mousa, director of YoJACK. "I am always greeted with much anticipation when it's time to begin."

Mousa said YoJACK gives students positive experiences in team-building skills and leadership skills and teaches them the importance of supporting and giving back to their communities.

"This is not an investment you see right away," she said. "But later on down the road, those students do stand up in the different clubs, organizations and jobs they are involved with and become leaders both in their personal and professional lives."

Although not able to attend Wednesday's event, Jim Plump, executive director of Jackson County Industrial Development Corp., was credited with helping establish the speakers' series.

"Jim has provided us with many outstanding speakers," said Ann Windley, executive director of Leadership Jackson County. "When he heard about Pat, he told us that we needed to get her to come speak. He said she was both an outstanding speaker and a dynamic person. And boy, was he right. As owner and developer of Holiday World in southern Indiana, Pat Koch has a high energy level which is hard to match."

During Wednesday's program, Koch shared her life story, with anecdotes about her family and a message about living life right.

"I've been very blessed in my life," she said. "For starters, my dad was Santa Claus. He traveled



Pat Koch, owner and developer of Holiday World and Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, laughs with the crowd about growing up with Santa as her dad and the many ups and downs of her life. Koch spoke Wednesday in Seymour as part of Leadership Jackson County's Distinguished Speaker Series. (Tribune photo by January Wetzel)

About Pat Koch

- Pat Koch is owner and operator of Holiday World and Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus
- After graduating from high school, she became a nun and nurse
- She left a religious order to help take care of her aging parents and married the owner of Santa Claus Land, which later became Holiday World

to parades all around the country and played a big part in Santa Claus Land. He cared so much about kids. It was his ministry. His 'ho-ho-ho' would light up a room."

But Koch wasn't always part of the amusement park business. She put herself through nursing school and even joined a sisterhood for a while. But when her parents became elderly and ill, she decided it was time to go back home.

When she arrived home by train in 1960, she was picked up by Bill Koch, a friend of the family. Pat eventually married Bill and together the families built one of the world's most highly regarded amusement park.

"We made a wonderful team," she said of her relationship with Bill and Bill's father, Louis.

Together, Pat and Bill had five children, all of whom worked in the park at one point and many of whom continue to play a role in the day-to-day operations of Holiday World.

Originally called Santa Claus Land, the park opened in 1946 with only a few attractions, Koch said. One of those was a train that still operates today.

"My father-in-law decided there should be something magical for children to do in a place called Santa Claus," she said. "So he purchased property and created Santa Claus Land. Bill eventually took over and wanted to do more than just build an amusement park. He had such vision. He wanted to build a community."

And eventually, with the help of others, Christmas Lake Village was built, bringing a community that began with 25 people to a town of 2,200. The area now boasts three elementary schools, Koch said.

After Christmas Lake Village was completed, the family put more attention into the amusement park, and over the years, Santa Claus Land grew into Holiday World, which has won awards for the cleanest, friendliest and best family amusement park, not only in the country, but in the world. The Koch family, led by Pat, still owns and operates Holiday World amusement park and Splashin' Safari water park. In the coming years, Koch announced, the park will expand to include a section devoted to the Thanksgiving holiday. Already, visitors can celebrate Christmas, Halloween and the Fourth of July all in one trip.

"Being a part of this family and this business has given me such an appreciation for others," she said.

"I just love making other people happy. It's in my nature," Koch said. "There are things that each and every one of us can do every day to enrich our lives and the lives of others. Love what you do. Make somebody laugh every day. Respect individuals, and laugh yourself. Be an instrument of inspiration. Make hospitality a way of living."