

“Believer, dreamer and doer”

2022 SACHEM AWARD – PATRICIA KOCH
Governor Eric J. Holcomb
December 9, 2022

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Thank you, President Ellspermann, and good morning, all!

Nothing gets me feeling festive like a caroling choir or visiting “America’s Christmas Hometown.”

Because “Santa Claus” isn’t just the name of this place, it’s a culture of caring and a timeless tradition.

And today, it serves as another Hoosier tradition that unites us to recognize an individual who’s among the reasons why.

The SACHEM is the single highest honor an Indiana governor can give, reserved only for Hoosiers whose moral character and lifetimes of accomplishment have made incredible impacts in the lives of their fellow citizens.

During the past five years, it’s been an absolute privilege for me to award the SACHEM to Holocaust survivor, the late Eva Mozes Kor, whose legacy continues to challenge and change hearts;

And Sergeant Sammy Davis, whose heroism extends beyond the battlefield to help his fellow veterans to this very day;

And Dr. George Rapp, who invented treatments, and built medical facilities around the world;

And Reggie Jones, Sr., who used his business success to create mentorships and scholarships;

And Jim Morris, who shaped our capital city skyline and fed millions of adults and orphans around the world.

And today, we're here to place another on a very short list of names forever engraved in our state capitol because they are indeed the very best among us.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's a privilege to bestow our state's highest honor, for only the 17th time in our state's history, to Patricia Yellig Koch.

Pat's hospitality, heart for service and signature humility are not a surprise to anyone who knows her well.

In fact, when I called to tell her she would receive the Sachem Award, she wondered if I had maybe "contacted the wrong Pat Koch?"

But this room is full of ample evidence she's worthy, with many more hearts way beyond these walls, touched by her love and transformational kindness.

Talk to Pat for even a moment and you can feel how firmly she *believes* in Santa Claus – the "man" and the town.

For sure, she's a *daring dreamer*, but she's also a *doer* who's devoted her life to putting Santa Claus, Indiana and this region on the global map, preserving its rich history, and keeping its four-season embers glowing bright for generations now and to come.

And what I just love is she *believes* she was put here to serve her neighbors – and in true Hoosier form, "neighbors" are broadly defined as everyone she meets.

What Pat has accomplished hasn't been easy – especially at the time *when* she did it.

But that's only fueled her drive to achieve the impossible, with results to prove it, as she shunned the easy path and blazed her own trail, inspiring us all.

Pat, I "made a list and checked it twice."

I'm *sure* you are the *right* person.

Let's briefly rewind the tape.

Pat was born during the Depression and raised during World War II in a house without hot running water.

She helped her father, Jim Yellig, answer letters addressed to the Santa Claus, Indiana post office from children all over the country.

Her dad first found his calling as Santa Claus serving aboard a Navy ship during World War I – because the sailor from Santa Claus, Indiana of course had to be the ship's Santa.

And then he proudly traded his dress whites for a red suit when he returned home.

And there was Pat, always proud to be “Santa’s Daughter.”

When she graduated from Dale High School in 1948, someone asked her, “Why would a *girl* want to go to college?”

But eager for education, and undeterred as usual, Pat followed her dream of becoming a nurse, and she boarded that bus to Evansville.

At St. Mary’s School of Nursing, she gained not only an education, she found her true calling: serving others.

Pat donned the Holy Habit of the Catholic Daughters of Charity and dedicated her life to caring for those in need.

As a registered nurse, she spent a decade with the religious order, working in Catholic hospitals across the country, helping disadvantaged children, and leading a medical unit in a Chicago hospital.

Along the way, she continued her education, earning a bachelor’s degree in nursing.

And from her sisters in service, she learned life lessons that not only shaped her, but empowered her to lead.

Like when a wise nun once told her, “I’m not running a popularity contest; I’m running a hospital.”

Pat saw in Sister Carlos the kind of person she wanted to be.

And she continued her commitment to caring for others – even when her father’s heart attack and mother’s health forced her to make a difficult choice: leave the Order behind and come home.

A train dropped her off in Washington, Indiana, where – cue the mistletoe – her future husband, Bill Koch, picked her up.

It was the beginning of an enduring relationship and powerful partnership.

Raising five children and running Santa Claus Land alongside her husband, Pat – always the pioneer – became a working mom, with a crib in her office.

And together, for 40 years of marriage, until he passed, Pat and Bill were full partners in building the first theme park in America, welcoming millions to Holiday World and Splashin’ Safari.

If you look up “Hoosier Hospitality” in the dictionary, I’m sure you’ll find Pat’s name at the top of the list!

But Pat wasn’t just welcoming guests from other towns, states and countries, she was actually creating and curating a caring culture at Holiday World that has given generations of youth not only their first job, but the skills to succeed where life takes them next.

Never content behind a desk, Pat led by example – from park open to close – cleaning toilets alongside her young employees, often taking them under her wing.

That’s true of Brandon Berg and Samantha Ray.

Hired as a ride operator, Brandon was what some might call a troubled teen.

Samantha’s home life wasn’t ideal, but her choice to work at Holiday World changed her life.

Because Pat saw something in each of them they didn’t see in themselves.

And they saw her faith and unmatched work ethic – and how much she cared.

Brandon took Pat’s always direct advice to heart.

And she became his second mom.

Pat mentored Samantha, and gave her the gift of an education that she herself treasured most: helping her through college.

At Samantha's wedding, Pat gave the bride away.

Today, Samantha owns her own real estate business.

Brandon met his wife at Holiday World, where he's worked for 34 seasons and now leads admissions.

We're honored to have Brandon and Samantha here with us today.

Now, I could recount stories like these until Christmas of 2023, for Pat continues to maximize every moment in service of others.

When her beloved St. Nicholas Catholic Church – built in 1880 – needed saving, Pat stepped in to ensure it will stand as a refuge for the faithful for decades to come.

She still serves on multiple boards, she founded the Santa Claus Museum and Village, and she *just* wrote a book to help fund her dream of a *larger* museum that can hold all the Santa Claus artifacts she's collected over the years.

And – get this – she earned a master's degree at age 70 *while* beating stage-four cancer, and continues to *believe* education is perhaps the best present a person can receive, giving scholarships to local students.

And she's kept the magic of Christmas alive for too many children to count on any list – most she will never meet, in countries and continents a world away – whose eyes light up with joy the moment they see that return letter Pat and her “elves” write back to them with the famous Santa Claus, Indiana postmark.

Because – like her Santa Claus statue – Pat's life's work itself is an enduring monument to a community made stronger because of the way she *believes* in it, this region and state shaped by her heart and hospitality, and in turn, brightened generations of lives because of the way she relentlessly puts her passion into action.

Pat has rightfully earned fame and acclaim.

In addition to an honorary doctorate, she has a street named after her, and she's only the second woman inducted into the International Santa Claus Hall of Fame.

And although her accomplishments are many, I'll go out on a limb and say: what she's most proud of are her children, 13 grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

I suspect those kiddos are learning to answer letters, too!

And, no surprise, at age 91, Pat's learning more German words through online classes – so she can respond to more letters!

Mach schnell!

Now, I don't want to keep the "Chief Elf" away from the letters piling up, so, let me just say in closing:

Pat, thank you, for always *believing*, and for your life's work, which continues to this day, and has brought so many good tidings – so much joy – to so many, for so long.

Frankly, Pat, Santa couldn't do it without you.

For *all* these reasons, and so many more, it's my honor today to wish you all a Merry Christmas, and joyfully present the 2022 Sachem Award to a great Hoosier, Patricia Koch.

###