

Former Washington man credits family, community values in rise to top

Stu Levenick's Journeys as a Caterpillar Exec Have Taken Him Around the Globe

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Stu Levenick

When Peoria-based engine and heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar, inc. named Stu Levenick as a Group President and Executive Office member last April, a Washington Community High School graduate became one of the most powerful executives in the company's hierarchy.

At age 51, Levenick is one of the youngest group presidents in the history of "Big Yellow". After growing up in Washington and graduating from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana in 1976, Levenick has called many addresses home during the course of his Cat career, including Oregon, Florida, Massachusetts, Canada, Singapore, and Tokyo.

Levenick told the Courier that no matter where he has gone, the simple values instilled in him by his parents and the community as a whole have stayed with him throughout the course of his meteoric career.

"Growing up in Washington was an we experience that has helped me my whole life," Levenick said from his seventh floor office at Peoria's Caterpillar world headquarters, located downtown. "It was the commensurate American Midwest experience. I realize now that there was a perfect conspiracy between my parents, teachers, and community members that as a kid, you cannot escape. My parents were very focused on making sure I studied and worked hard, and Sister Mary Ann and Father Shubert at St. Patrick's Grade School were very focused on making sure I toed the line. And in between, there was the community. That conspiracy worked on me, it worked on my brothers, and I can tell that spirit is still ver much alive and well in the community today."

Rise to the Top

Fittingly, Levenick's Caterpillar office features an eastern window that looks out over the Illinois River towards Washington, the community he credits with helping to shape and sharpen the business and personal skills that were required during Levenick's rise to a position as one of the company's top six leaders.

As one of the only five group presidents, Levenick's areas of responsibility include Asia Pacific Marketing and Operations Divisions, Global Purchasing, the Human Services Division, and Solar Turbines, Inc. His current responsibilities involve international and coast-to-coast travel, but it all began right here in Washington.

Born in the state of Washington, the Levenick family did not arrive in Washington, Illinois, until Stu was two years old. The family first resided on Lawndale and Morris Streets before settling in on Westgate Road. After attending St. Pats and WaCoHi and graduating in 1971, Levenick enrolled at the UOI to study forest management and made the football team without a scholarship as a walk-on. He played football for five years (one season he was medically red shirted) at the UOI, eventually being named team captain, team MVP, and being drafted by the Baltimore Colts of the National Football League.

"I enrolled at Illinois in order to get the best education I could," Levenick recalled. "I ended up having a pretty nice career down there playing center, guard, and tackle. Unfortunately, when I ran they had to time me with a calendar. It was fun and gave me a lot of great memories."

Levenick had hoped to parlay his forestry degree (Stu also holds a Master of Science degree in management from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is a Sloan Fellow, as well) into a job with a paper or timber company, but a poor economy at the time saw such businesses tightening their belts and putting a freeze on hiring. After encouragement from his father, Lyle, Stu decided to try his luck at Caterpillar. To his relief, Big yellow wanted Levenick in a big way.

"They gave me a good offer, the best I had. I cancelled all of my other interviews and went with them. I was very impressed by the company and its culture," Levenick said of his 1977 hiring.

During a period Levenick lived in Toronto, he met his wife, Nancy, who was from nearby Hamilton, Ontario. They were married in 1985 and are currently remodeling a home in Peoria, where they reside. After over two decades of moving to different homes all over the globe, Levenick found himself returning home – sort of.

"Nancy had actually picked out our house from overseas, and it happened to be in Peoria, I figured that since I've dragged her all across the world, she had the right to pick which house she wanted to live in," Levenick said. "I guess me meeting Nancy and bringing her here was one of the first examples of free trade between Canada and the U.S."

Watching Over 75,000 Employees

As a group president, Levenick reports to only one superior, Caterpillar Chairman Jim Owens. Five of 28-group vice-presidents work immediately under Levenick, and 75,000 rank-and-file and other employees appear further down the company's hierarchy.

"We (the five group presidents) all work very closely together as a team with Jim to essentially manage the company and develop future strategies," Stu said of his role with the company.

As head of Cat's Asia Pacific divisions Levenick is required to make frequent trips to the Land of the Rising Sun, an environment he is no stranger to. Prior to locating in Peoria last year, Nancy and Stu lived in the Far East for nearly five years.

"Asia represents a huge growth opportunity for Caterpillar, and we've just announced plans for a new Innovations Center in China. Asia is a big part of Caterpillar's future international plans."

In his role as Group President Levenick is responsible for the company's Global Purchasing division, buying everything from the steel used in constructing heavy earth moving equipment to the drafting pencils used to design them.

He also has responsibility for the company's solar turbine concern located in San Diego, one of Cat's fastest growing and most lucrative side ventures.

"Solar is one of the world's leading manufacturers of gas turbines," Levenick said. "We sell to the oil and gas industries, and our turbine engines are made up to 15,000 horsepower. It's a good business for Caterpillar."

Perhaps the most demanding and least appreciated aspect of Levenick's duties with Big Yellow comes in his role as head of the company's Human Services division, a post formerly held by Owens.

“Jim told me when I was named group president that this would be the most time consuming aspect of my duties, and he wasn’t exaggerating. I oversee aspects in Human Services including compensation and benefits, labor relations, and training, and everyone has pretty strong opinions on those subjects,” Levenick said.

When asked what a typical day in the life of Caterpillar group president entails, Levenick said that no day is “typical,” though the job requires constant travel to board meetings and such.

“I start at seven and go until about six or six-thirty. It’s a very interesting job, and there truly is never a dull moment”

Small-town Values and Family Helped Shape a Leader

Levenick said he has nothing but fond memories of the community he grew up in and of the people who inhabit it, a point brought home following the December 12, 2004 death of his mother, Donna, 76.

“There is probably no better example of the type of community Washington is than what I witnessed with the outpouring of support my dad, my two brothers, and I received when she passed away,” Levenick recalled. “I saw high school classmates I hadn’t seen for 25 years, old friends of the family – it was really something to see how that community came together and continues to support my dad. I had been gone so long; I guess I didn’t expect it. It was like I had just picked up where I left off as a kid.”

Levenick needn’t have worried about being forgotten by his hometown. Don Gronewold, owner of Don’ Cards and Gifts and former city mayor, gave a high-school aged Stu one of his first jobs as a “go-fer” and counter person at Don’s Pharmacy on the town square. Gronewold said he remembered Levenick as an outstanding worker and pointed to his success as an example for the youth of Washington to follow.

“Don’s a great guy and a community leader,” Levenick said. “At the time I went to him for a job, he was a pretty serious guy, and I was pretty nervous. He thought about it for a while before he hired me. Don taught me dedication to doing a good job and being accountable and responsible for your actions.”

Stu also worked as a youth at detasseling near El Paso and as a “curbie” for A&W, a job he recalled as “not exactly glamorous to a young boy entering high school,” but rewarding nonetheless.

Of all the people and influences Levenick cites a helping him to shape his ethics and values, though, Lyle and Donna Levenick will always head the top of the list.

“My parents always focused me on not being too pre-occupied with (the present), but to be more focused on where you’re going in the long run. Coaches and teachers helped me to keep an eye on that, too. My parents put a real emphasis on education above everything else. I had a great athletic career, but it was always subservient to academics,” Levenick said.

Stu offered an example of the emphasis on education provided by his mother:

“I was fortunate enough to get drafted in the NFL. Going into the spring semester of my senior year, on draft day I got a call from Ted Marchibroda from the Colts telling me I was selected in the seventh pick. When I called my mother to tell her, she said, ‘that’s nice honey, but what are your grades.’ She was proud of me, of course, but it put in perspective what was really important. It was the same way with my brothers.”

Since Stu's career as an NFL lineman did not turn out as hoped, it is now obvious to Levenick that Donna's words were literally dripping with motherly wisdom. It's not every mother's son, after all, that rises to the level of group president of the world's leading heavy equipment manufacturer.

Levenick said that during an overseas meeting last year he had an opportunity to pause and reflect on the success he has enjoyed with Caterpillar.

"About a year ago I was walking out of China's Great Hall of the People with another Caterpillar executive and Washington native, Paul Blackburn of our Asia division. We had just left a meeting with senior Chinese leaders and were standing on the steps when it dawned on both of us, and we had to laugh," Levenick said. "I said to Paul, 'you know, this isn't going too bad for a small-town kid from Washington, Illinois.'"

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