

Kurt Tjelmeland Alumni Feature

Name: Kurt Tjelemand

Graduation Year: 1980

Job Title: President/CEO/Owner

Organization/Company Name: T&K Roofing and Sheet Metal Company Inc.

Location of Employment: Ely, Iowa

Job Responsibilities: Oversee the entire operations of the company.

Describe your journey since graduating from Prairie High School, including any significant career milestones or educational achievements. How did your experience at Prairie prepare you for your current endeavors?

After graduating from Prairie I enrolled at Coe College intending to get an accounting and business degree and eventually becoming a CPA(Certified Public Accountant). I had taken accounting classes at Prairie and did well so it seemed like a logical career path. Coe College also had an outstanding Division III baseball program and I planned on playing baseball at Coe as well. About 2 years into my college career I decided that public accounting wasn't likely for me as it was not very exciting in my eyes. While I did intend on completing my accounting degree I leaned into the business degree as well as some other courses Coe offered including history and political science. Through that process I became interested in Law School and ended up pursuing a law degree. I graduated from Coe College with a dual accounting and business degree and a minor in political science. I attended and graduated from Northwestern School of Law in Portland, Oregon in 1987, passed the Iowa Bar exam later that year and started practicing law. Interestingly, I found the practice of law not very interesting (it's nothing like what you see on TV) and after a couple of years decided to join T&K Roofing. T&K Roofing is a family business started by my parents in 1962. I have been here ever since, formally purchasing 100% of the company from my parents in 2009.

My experience at Prairie was absolutely critical in preparing me for college and my career. The Prairie High School curriculum had a number of courses specifically aimed at students desiring to attend college and those classes, while incredibly challenging, were exactly what was needed to get a student ready for the rigors of college. This time period was long before college AP classes were offered in the high schools.

What are some of your favorite memories from your time at Prairie? Did you participate in any extracurricular activities or clubs? How did they impact your experience? What staff member or class had the biggest impact on you and why?

High School was 3 absolute great years(back then only 10th, 11th and 12th grades were in high school). I would be in BIG trouble if I didn't first say that my favorite memory of high school is meeting, dating and eventually marrying my wife Angie. In 2024, we will have been together a total of 46 great years, have two great kids (also Prairie graduates) and three awesome grandkids (currently attending Prairie).

At Prairie, I participated in numerous extracurricular activities. I played basketball, ran cross country and most important to me played baseball where I was a 3 year starter on the varsity. I also participated in choir, swing choir and appeared in 3 different musicals, the last one playing Tevye(the lead) in Fiddler on the Roof. I truly believe extracurricular activities are integral to a student's success post high school years. They give a person confidence and broaden their skill set as playing sports or appearing on stage in front of a relatively large number of people can be challenging and a little daunting. Those activities also provide opportunities to make life-long friends. I still have close friends from those days.

The staff at Prairie was amazing from top to bottom so naming a few is very, very difficult. There were a number of Prairie staff that definitely had an impact on me personally. Dot Pospischil taught a college prep course that challenged me, Russ Price the music teacher pushed me to take larger roles in choir and Coalition (swing choir then), Roxanne Schrieber the Spanish teacher and director of all the musicals encouraged me to get and stay involved, and Mick Mattiace the baseball coach was also a big influence on me from an athletics and physical fitness standpoint. Those but a few and I know for sure I am missing many. One I should also call out is Ken Steine who was the principal at that time. Ken was a great administrator and I had the opportunity to be in class leadership with Ken oftentimes facilitating those efforts. He constantly was engaged with seemingly every student in the high school and always pushed us to achieve what we desired after high school. That and he truly appeared to be having fun leading Prairie High School.

What advice would you offer to today's high school graduates as they embark on their own paths beyond high school?

I'm not sure any advice I have is new and some kids probably have heard it repeatedly but I would tell every kid to NOT set limits for themselves and don't let others do so either. Stay flexible and definitely find something that you love to do as a career. A person truly has to have an attitude where if they hear the word "NO" it motivates them to get to "YES."

Also, as you get older you find out that "living to work" isn't as good as "working to live." Life is too short to miss out on things outside of your working career. While I'm not the best example of that motto, it is something I learned and feel like I "righted the ship" early enough in my life to have very few regrets. Along with that motto one has to believe that you cannot have enough friends and you need to work to maintain those friendships. My wife and I are blessed with an incredible group of many, many friends many of which came from high school and college. It's difficult to not drift away from people as life can definitely get in the way. You need to fight hard to keep those contacts up as at the end of the day(and one's life) there is nothing more important than friends and family. Now that I'm older I realize that many of the groups I was in at Prairie truly had a family feel to it and I'm thankful for finding that thought.