



Ric Kirby: Focused, Strategic, Patient

Written by Kaaren Morgner

Kirby Manufacturing, Inc. is known for its innovative design in cattle-feeding equipment. Ric Kirby, third generation to lead the company, knows firsthand the value of new technology, innovative design change, and preserving a heritage, all while spearheading philanthropic endeavors in Merced. “My family has always given

back to the community; serving the community and giving back was instilled in me early on,” Ric recalled.

Ric and his sister, Kelly, were raised by a single mom. “My Dad died young. We didn’t have much. But every week Mom had an amount from her paycheck given directly to the United Way. We saw that,” Ric remembered.

In addition to his mother’s example, discussions with his grandfather, Tom Kirby, and great uncle, Bill Kirby, laid the foundation for his personal philanthropic endeavors in Merced. “My great uncle was instrumental in starting the Merced Historical Society,” Ric said. “He got me involved early on. I’ve been involved ever since.” Supporting

agriculture and education has always been his priority, whether FFA or 4-H, or Our Lady of Mercy School. “It was never if you give, it’s what you do!” he stated.

Kirby knew he wanted to be part of the family business. At age 13, he swept floors and stocked the soda machine. His pay was lunch and all the soda he could drink. “I had the key to the soda machine!” he chuckled. During summer breaks and vacations in his high school years, he sat all day drilling holes in steel plates. Today, a high-density plasma cutter uses electric current and gas to vaporize the steel to make those holes.

He tailored his studies at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo with the family business in mind. In 1989, Ric returned to Merced with a degree in Ag Business

Management, determined to make Merced his home. Barry McAuley, then on the Mercy Foundation Board, approached him to serve. “I was fresh out of college trying to figure out my job. I didn’t have my feet firm on the ground. And I really didn’t have time and wasn’t as interested then, but the seed was planted.”

In the years that followed, he and his wife Dana targeted where their philanthropic efforts would be best used. On their decision to support the hospital, Ric noted, “I look at impact. What will have the greatest impact on the community as a whole? The hospital. It truly helps anyone and everyone who walks through the doors.”

“So, 25 years later Barry McAuley came back to me and said, ‘We’ve got some openings on the board. Are you interested?’ This time I had a different answer. I said, Yes I am!”

Saying yes put Ric in the center of the first Capital Campaign for a major piece of equipment at the new hospital. Dr. Sunit Patel, pulmonologist for the hospital, approached the Foundation Board requesting funds be raised for an Endoscopic Ultrasound (EUS). Dr. Patel made a presentation explaining the benefits of EUS in detecting (presence of cancer), staging (if and how far cancer has spread) and determining treatment for lung cancer, pancreatic cancer and other cancers of the



Above: Ric showing fellow board member Kaaren Morgner around the yard at Kirby Manufacturing.



Above: Ric is the third generation owner of Kirby Manufacturing, known for its innovative cattle-feeding equipment.

gastrointestinal tract. It was a far less invasive diagnostic procedure than what was currently in use. He highlighted its power to attract new doctors to the community.

Dr. Patel’s presentation had Ric’s attention as it tapped into a personal story, creating the motivation to champion bringing an EUS to Mercy Medical Center.

“My mom died of lung cancer in 1994,” Ric said. “She wasn’t diagnosed early enough to be able to do anything about it. So, she died 6 months after her diagnosis. That machine, if it was available, may have been something that would have detected the cancer earlier. And perhaps something could have been done about it. That struck a chord with me.”

That chord struck deep. Ric’s personal commitment to bringing

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the EUS to Mercy included not only a substantial donation, but investing the time to build a team, which included himself as the community/Foundation member, Dr. Patel as the physician champion, and Dr. Parminder Sidhu as the oncologist representing the Cancer Center, ready to speak with groups of potential donors. “It took longer than we expected,” he recalled, “but we just kept going!”

Dr. Patel recalled, “Mr. Kirby was instrumental in getting people to come and listen. He arranged groups to come early in the morning as well as evening gatherings to hear about EUS! There has to be a drive – otherwise, nothing would happen. I felt that drive was there and the time commitment was there, and Ric had the drive to make this happen. We had a team!”

The EUS has been in operation since 2014. Dr. Patel estimates use of the EUS to be 5-6 times per month. “It makes me feel good to hear about the (EUS) equipment’s use and its part in attracting new doctors to our area,” Ric smiled.

As a trustee of the Merced Historical Society, Ric has been involved with projects that preserve our community’s history, cultural heritage, and identity. When our hospital system changed its name to Dignity Health from Catholic Healthcare West, the logo also changed. Ric expressed concern that the logo did not retain the hospital’s Catholic identity. “It

was a plus sign – not a Christian cross. I thought, it’s a Catholic hospital and it’s using the Catholic identity. I’m Catholic. Catholic health care and Catholic education have done so much in this country for everyone, people who aren’t Catholic or even Christian!”

Ric found out the original architect’s drawings included a cross above the chapel, but it had been left out due to budget restrictions. Chuck Kassis (hospital



CEO) told the Foundation Board he wanted to rectify this and get it done. That was all Ric needed to hear. He knew he had all the equipment, manpower, and materials to complete the project. “I jumped in to help out, thinking this would be a quick, easy project. We’ll build you a cross! No problem! We can have this up in a week. Here it is a year and a half later and that cross is still not up!” he laughed, shaking his head. Kirby built a cross to the architect’s specifications only to find out that a state inspector had to witness each weld as it was made. It turned out to be easier to have the cross built by a contractor that was

familiar with the many regulations of the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development (OSHPD). Kirby generously funded the project yet again, and with a smile quipped, “It’s my cross to bear! I hope this one can be installed soon.”

Ric is no stranger to the time required to move projects forward. He celebrates the small victories along the road, while keeping the final destination in mind. “We

recently had the first Cardiac Catheterization Lab procedure. I want to let everyone know - Hey, we are moving forward! I attended the hospital demonstration of the da Vinci[®] Robotic Surgical System. I even got on the machine and tried it out, wow! A friend had a procedure done on the da Vinci[®]. He was up walking around the next day. That would never

have happened with traditional incision surgery. Now that wasn’t done here in Merced, but that’s what we want to be able to bring to our community!”

Ric Kirby’s quiet perseverance in giving is fueled by his enthusiasm and passion for the quality of health care in Merced. His gifts of time and service to the Foundation Board, and generous financial support of the Endoscopic Ultrasound equipment as well as the hospital chapel cross, embody the philanthropic spirit that moves Mercy Medical Center forward.