

The Klaus Kohl Story

By Paul Mills and Jeff Koehn



While states in the northern part of the country symbolize the fall season with the browning of tree leaves, Cape Coral signifies the change with one event, the German American Club's Oktoberfest.

For over 25 years Oktoberfest has become one of Cape Coral signature events, bringing over 30,000 people a year from all over the country to enjoy two weekends of German styled celebration.

If not for one man, the chances of Oktoberfest ever happening in Cape Coral would be unlikely. The man responsible for the creation and much of the success of the annual event is Klaus Kohl.

Affectionately known as, "Mr. Oktoberfest", Klaus had come to join the club in 1982. By 1985, it was Kohl who proposed the idea of hosting an annual Oktoberfest as a way for the club to generate revenue and celebrate its German heritage.

Kohl continued to be an integral part of Oktoberfest every year for the next 24 years. On October 21, 2010, just one day before the kickoff of the 2010 Oktoberfest, 71 year old Kohl passed away after slipping into a coma following a fall in his home.

Kohl's impact on, not just the event he created, but the community as a whole, is felt every year during this time. Kohl's hard work in the area has been recognized by Presidents and other dignitaries, including as recent as 2008 when he was awarded a special recognition by the Lee County Board of Commissioners.

As the 26th Annual Oktoberfest approaches many in the community are taking the time to remember all that Kohl brought to Cape Coral, "I came to lean on Klaus for help. He always told me when something looks good go to the root of it. There is always a better way to do it. He made you think," said current Oktoberfest Chairman Paul Mills said, "When he passed away just before opening day last year it did not really hit me because of everything going on with the festival. This year it has sunk in, and I will truly miss seeing him here this year and every year after."

Mills sentiments are shared by many and all are saying that Oktoberfest will never be the same without Kohl's involvement. Oktoberfest has now become a living legacy to all that Kohl has done to make it the success it is.

To understand Kohl's impact on the community, one must thoroughly understand the man simply known to many as "Mr. Oktoberfest".

In 1938, Kohl was born in Germany. In 1957, Kohl made the move to the United States and quickly enlisted in the United States Army and served in the Korea. After serving in the military, Kohl settled down in Michigan where he lived until moving to Cape Coral in 1981.

Shortly after moving to the area, Kohl sought out the local German American Club and applied for membership. During this time, Cape Coral's German American Club had closed its membership due to already strong numbers in membership. Being denied membership was not something Kohl was going to sit back and take with a smile. Kohl fought for club membership saying he could not believe that being from Germany he could not join the club. Kohl was finally granted admission to the club, through sheer determination and perseverance. These qualities would serve Kohl well as he worked his way up through the ranks at the club, "Klaus was a starter, a pusher, and a leader. He was the best front man I have ever seen," said former German American Club President Willie Tamedl.

Not content with being just a member in the club Kohl quickly took charge of the club's entertainment, scheduling and booking of all the entertainment held at the club's.

In 1985 attended the Lantana American German Club's Oktoberfest. At the time, Lantana boasted the premiere Oktoberfest in the state of Florida. While at the event Kohl came up with the idea of the Cape Coral German American Club hosting its own Oktoberfest celebration.

Using the club's recent success in holding Gartenfest events, Kohl began soliciting support within the organization to develop its own Oktoberfest. Looking back, it would seem the idea of the club hosting its own Oktoberfest would be an easy decision. But, in the early 1980's things were much different. Those on the board at that time were skeptical. Fearing that it would not be a success and the club itself did not have the experience of knowing how to host such a large scale event. It was an uphill battle for Kohl and those who supported his idea. Even then President of the club was not behind the idea. Through much lobbying and debating Kohl and his group came out victorious after the Board of Directors voted 6-4 to move forward with the event.

Kohl took the same passion and determination he used to get the approval vote pushed through and applied it to getting the event off the ground. Kohl put together a group of seven club members to chair various responsibilities and committees to move the event forward. Kohl reached out to members he felt had an expertise that would benefit the event, such as Arnold Tomanek, a retired butcher. Tomanek was an expert in meats and Kohl put him in charge of purchasing food for Oktoberfest. Through his efforts, Tomanek was able to get the club discounted prices on meats for meals at the event, "Klaus knew how to use the people around him to make sure everything was top notch. He also made sure we got it at the best price we could get," said Willie Tamadel, who served as the Club President for the first three years the Oktoberfest was held.

The group of seven worked over the next year meeting in Tamadel's office every week and over the following year worked on everything from getting the proper permits and police coverage to assigning duties such as handling ticket sales, merchandising and food sales. The ladies of the club even got into the game by making handmade items to sell at the event, "That small group of people were not doing it for ego. They worked hard for the benefit of the club to make it a success," said Tamadel.

After a year of preparation and hard work, Kohl and his group of volunteers had put together the club's first Oktoberfest. The event took place during the Columbus Day weekend and was grand in scale. The event not only hosted vendors, various German cuisines and live entertainment that has become a staple at the event, but for that first year, there was also a parade and attendance from many dignitaries including; Mayors, Councilmen, County Commissioners, even the German Council out of Atlanta and Miami attended the inaugural event.

By the end of the weekend, the event, deemed a success, had generated \$10,000 in revenue for the club. The second year, the event brought in \$25,000. By the third year, the event skyrocketed in success and before long Kohl was again in front of the Board of Directors suggesting adding a second weekend to the event. This time Kohl met very little resistance and the club expanded Oktoberfest to what it is today, a grand two weekend event, held the last two weekends of October.

Kohl went on to Chair the event for its first three years before moving on to leading the organization as President of the German American Club. Kohl would go on to hold the office of president on two separate occasions, 1989-1991, also from 2000-2003. Kohl would also continue to serve on the Club's Board of Directors for over 16 years total, "He pumped life into this club, both membership and financially. He put us on the map. This club would not be here today if not for the event," said Tamedl.

In 1991, Kohl also found time to co-create the United German American Society's Florida chapter. With all of this going on, Kohl amazingly found time to start and run his own successful business. Kohl founded Tri-County Blueprint in 1982, a business that still runs today with locations in Fort Myers and Naples.

Even with the success of Cape Coral's Oktoberfest, Kohl still traveled frequently to the east coast of Florida to get ideas for the local club. It was during one of these trips that Kohl met his future wife Teresa. Wed on New Year's Eve, Teresa and Klaus, were married for 15 years. The couple became inseparable. Teresa even took to Klaus' Oktoberfest passion and began serving as the Chairperson for the Ms. Oktoberfest Pageant and the Oktoberfest Kick-Off Dinner, positions she still holds to this day, "Klaus thought the world revolved around Teresa. He would do anything to make her happy," said Paul Mills.

For 24 years, Kohl became a familiar fixture at the annual Oktoberfest. Whether driving around in his golf cart surveying all that was going on or sitting at the bar drinking a scotch, Kohl was always found at the club during Oktoberfest from start to finish.

While Oktoberfest will never be the same without Kohl, his spirit and legacy lives on each year as Oktoberfest continues to be one of not only Cape Coral's but Southwest Florida's marquee events, "Klaus was probably one of the most honest and straight forward men I ever met in my life. If he gave you an answer, you knew it was an honest one. I will truly miss his friendship," said Mills.