

He's A Human Fountain Of Ideas

By Bettina Heinz Hurst

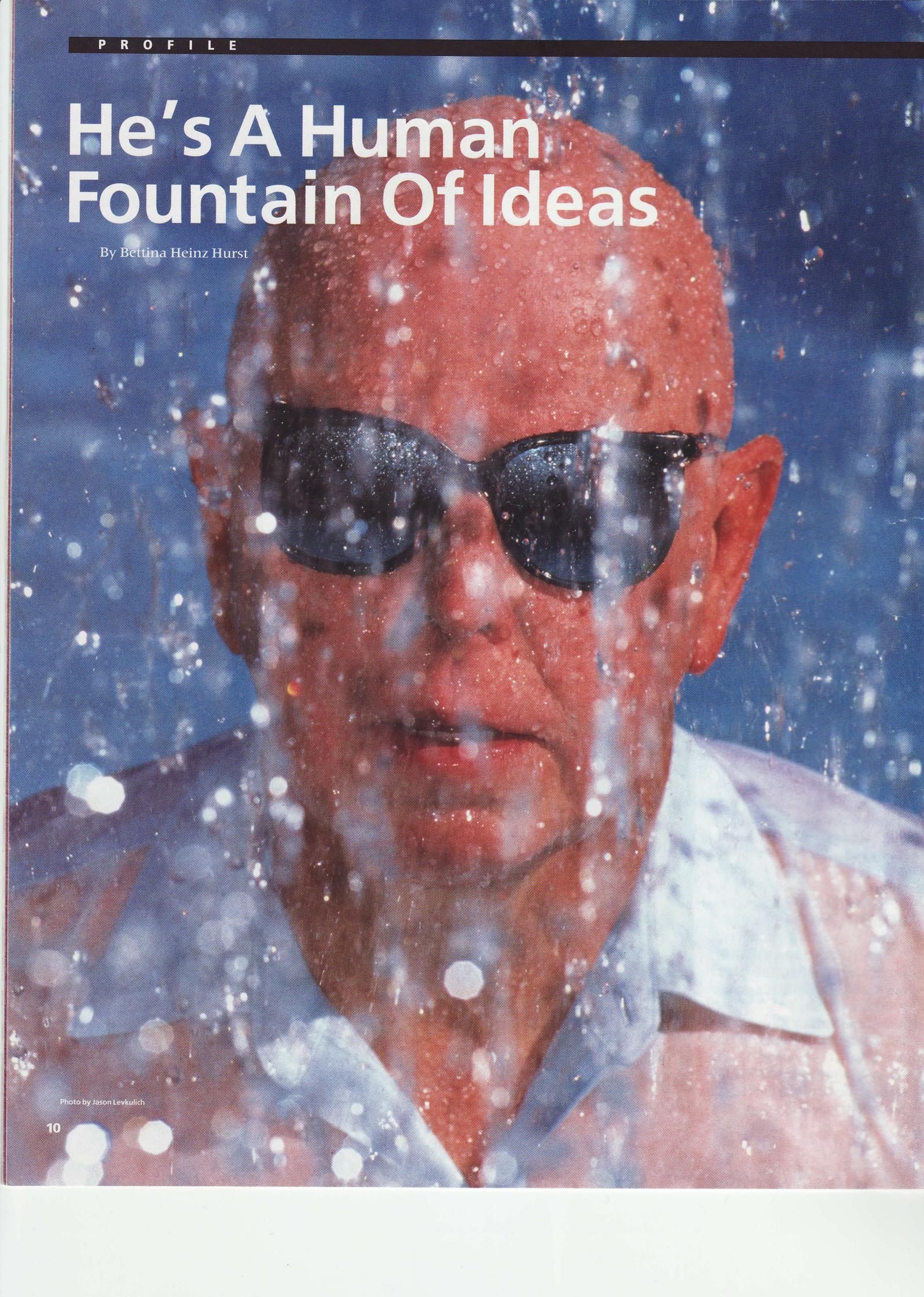


Photo by Jason Levkulich

He's bold, bald and bubbly. He wants your community to be a Groundwater Guardian. A tireless advocate, Bob Kuzelka has been the turbine in the launching of a nationwide program designed to empower communities to protect their groundwater.

And he can't stop moving.

"I've simply never seen Bob walk slow. He's just a high energy person," said Bob Volk, director of the Water Center/Environmental Programs unit at UNL.

Kuzelka is Volk's assistant and Groundwater Guardian program director for the Lincoln-based Groundwater Foundation.

The foundation was formed 10 years ago in the kitchen of its president, Susan Seacrest. Driven by her desire to protect groundwater, the organization began to take shape. When she was looking for someone with planning expertise, a friend recommended Kuzelka, who was working for the Conservation and Survey Division at UNL.

A community planner, Kuzelka was immediately excited about the prospects of the Groundwater Foundation, especially when Seacrest mentioned her idea of starting a nationwide, community-based program. "That's when Bob came up with the phrase 'Groundwater Guardian,'" Seacrest said.

"Bob and I really hit it off right away. He was the perfect person to be involved in that," Seacrest said. "We both passionately believe in the value of Groundwater Guardian, and I know he truly, truly cares. That's what I value most in him."

Kuzelka's creativity and team-orientation are appreciated by others, as well.

"Bob always works for consensus, but he's also always willing to speak his opinion. It's never a dull meeting when he's present," Volk said.

Loud, passionate exchanges are a regular part of planning meetings involving Kuzelka and herself, Seacrest said.

"Bob and I have a very interesting working relationship. We're both very strong-willed, and we both air strong opinions," Seacrest said. "We can disagree without having it affect our personal friendship. Some people hear us screaming and yelling and worry, but those are our best meetings."

Although he is vocal and direct, Kuzelka is willing to swim with the flow.

"I've found him to be a real team player. Once a decision has been made, whether he agrees with it or not, he joins forces with you," Volk said.

Kuzelka is a thorough planner and coordinator of program activities, Volk said. As assistant to the director, he plans the annual Nebraska water conference, the fall faculty symposium and the spring water seminar series.

"He's tireless. He seems to be able to juggle a number of activities at the same time that might intimidate others," Volk said. "He's an optimist, a ball of energy."

Kuzelka also enjoys sharing his enthusiasm about water with his students.

With an academic appointment in the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Wildlife, he teaches two undergraduate courses, one on natural resources policy and one on hydrogeography. He also advises the Soil and Water Resources Club.

"Every time I teach the hydrogeography class, I'm fascinated

by the uniqueness of our planet. That uniqueness is solely due to water," Kuzelka said.

Rachael Herpel has been Kuzelka's teaching assistant for two years. A graduate student in community and regional planning, Herpel said she thinks his students profit from his interest in their careers.

"He is always helping students with references, scholarship applications and internship information. He teaches practical aspects of policy planning in the classroom that students will encounter later in their careers," Herpel said.

Originally, Kuzelka set out to become an architect, but one of his mentors, Emil Christiansen, taught a required course in community planning that sparked his interest.

"Obviously, that planted a seed in me. I suppose my overriding interest is government and policy and how that works in planning" Kuzelka said.

In 1962, he graduated with a bachelor of architecture from the University of Nebraska. After serving as an Army officer in Korea, he took on a teaching assistantship at the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. In 1967, he was graduated with a master's degree in community and regional planning. Kuzelka retains a fondness for designing publications and maps and an appreciation of well-designed buildings.

The Norfolk native has been around the world, from participating in a two-week seminar in Athens on ekistics, the science of human settlement, to studying land value taxation on a Fulbright scholarship in Australia.

In 1969, Kuzelka worked with the Great Society program in a black neighborhood in Tulsa,

Oklahoma. He eventually returned to Nebraska, first working for the state government, then for the Conservation and Survey Division.

It was in that position that Kuzelka wetted his feet in natural resources issues.

He audited 18 credit hours on water and water planning and eagerly absorbed the new information. Over the years, he has developed a strong expertise in water and natural resources aspects of planning. In 1990, Nebraska Gov. Kay Orr designated Kuzelka as a "Soil and Water Conservation Steward."

Kuzelka is always on the go.

He is involved in community issues and has served on the Mayor's Bicycle Safety Committee in Lincoln, and the Nebraska Civil Liberties Union Prisoners' Rights Committee. He is vice chair of the City of Lincoln Street Planning Advisory Committee.

He is a trustee on the Wyuka Cemetery Board, one of the few state-charter cemeteries in the nation, and has just retired from the board of Lincoln Friends of Chamber Music after 10 years of service.

Staff at both the Water Center/Environmental Programs unit and the Groundwater Foundation said they appreciate Kuzelka's thoughtfulness and kindness. He buys roses for Valentine's Day, brings back trinkets from his travels or takes staff to lunch.

Despite his hectic schedule, Kuzelka always finds time for a good cup of tea, his "drink of preference," and a few laps in the pool. He goes swimming every day, an exercise routine he began 27 years ago.

"That's my real commitment to water," he chuckled. ■

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