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Building trust, developing a reputation

BY JIM DAVIS
STAFF WRITER

Steve Brettell hardly could have avoided moving into the Power & Light Building.

It just makes too much sense for the avowed history buff to be in what he calls "the finest example of art deco architecture west of the Mississippi."

"I love this building," Brettell said. "Where else are you going to find this?"

Brettell was cozy with the 73-year-old icon long before Alsation Land Co. moved its offices to the building's 27th floor in December.

The relationship began in 1995. After hearing that the building's leasing agent was leaving, Brettell called the property's New York-based owner to pitch his services. He got the job.

Three months later, movie theater magnate Stan Durwood unveiled plans for the Power & Light District. The grandiose urban entertainment complex never was built, but the ill-fated proposal's threatened condemnation of the Power & Light Building left Brettell determined to preserve the structure's legacy.

Brettell urged officials of Gailoyd Enterprises Corp., the building's owner, to craft a redevelopment plan. He'd provide the local knowledge.

After three years spent securing incentives and making other preparations, he said he expects construction to begin soon. With Downtown in the midst of an unprecedented boom that promises to open an arena and entertainment district on the Power & Light Building's doorstep, Brettell could reap the rewards of his perseverance.

"I'm a firm believer that if you do what you say you're going to do when you say you're going to do it, that good things are going to come your way," he said.

Brettell has lived that belief. He brought it in 1989 to what was then called The Winbury Group, where he became one of the commercial real estate brokerage's first employees. What the former pipe welder and welding supply salesman lacked in real estate experience, he made up for with persistence.

"It's just a function of hard work," he said. "It's shoe leather. It's making phone calls. It's going to meetings. It's not giving up. You can call me at 6:30 or 7 o'clock on my desk phone, and every night, you'll find me at that desk. I'll be making calls."

When Brettell interviewed for the Winbury job, he wasn't shy in stating his intentions.

"I told them at the first meeting I wanted to build buildings," he said. "I wanted to develop real estate. I didn't want to just do a lease and hand it off and ask for my commission. There's not enough there. It doesn't keep me interested."

Ted Murray, president of what is now Grubb & Ellis/The Winbury Group, said he respects Brettell's resolve.

"He had a dream he wanted to follow," Murray said. "I'm never going to stand in the way of that."

Brettell's big break as a developer came in 1999. After completing a series of property sales for State Farm Insurance Cos., he searched for a location where the insurer could consolidate its Kansas City offices.

Scott Petersen, then in State Farm's facilities management department, remembered how Brettell delivered his findings.

"He sat there and said, 'Well, would you let me develop it for you?' There was a lot of stunned silence on the other side of the table," Petersen said.

State Farm officials told Brettell they needed time to respond. When their phone call came — "I can remember to this day, and still the chill runs up my back," Brettell said — the affirmation was a "life-changing experience."

Petersen, now Alsation's senior vice president of operations, said Brettell's ethics persuaded State Farm to let him build in Independence.

"When you're a corporation and you sign a lease, you're signing away a lot of assets, and you have to trust the person on the other side of the lease," he said, "because if you can't, that lease is worthless."

Brettell parlayed that project into work with

State Farm in other parts of the country.

John Wilson, who oversees State Farm's leasing, construction and contracts in California, said he listened when Brettell called

to ask about working for him.

"You learn to read people," Wilson said. "Steve has outstanding integrity and can build trust."

Alsation needed just 18 months — less than half the time Wilson said comparable projects can take — to deliver a new building to State Farm in a San Francisco suburb in October. Wilson said he has recommended Brettell to several of State Farm's other zone offices.

Equally impressed is Bill Esry, CEO of Blue Ridge Bank and Trust Co. After watching Brettell manage construction of State Farm's building in Independence, Esry said, the bank's board hired him to serve a similar role with its new headquarters on the other side of Interstate 70.

The bank's most telling endorsement of Brettell came in July, when Brettell accepted an invitation to join the bank's board of directors.

Brettell attributes his success to his associates. He'll take credit for being an astute judge of character.

"It's all about trust," he said. "If you think about it, everything you do in life — the people you spend your time with, the places you go — you trust them."

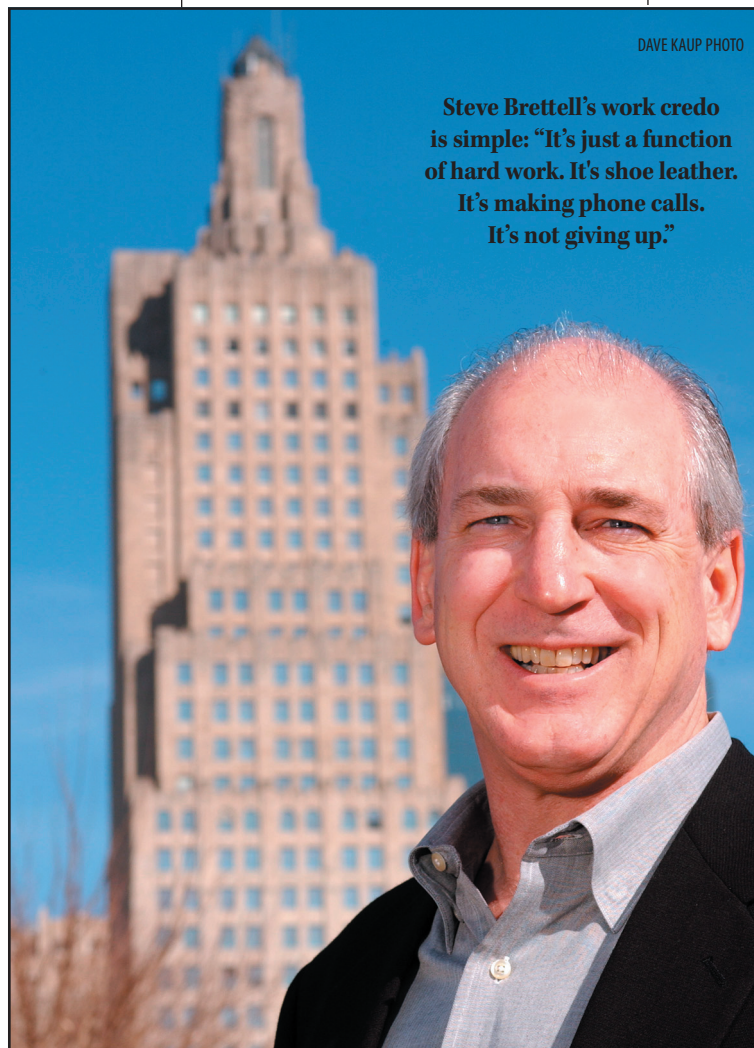
If that faith sounds a little old-fashioned, it's in keeping with Brettell's tastes.

"I like classic things," he said. "I like tradition."

A classic car collector, Brettell drives a 1967 Austin-Healey and renovated his Mission Hills house to look like a "100-year-old cottage."

"If you understand history and you understand all the mistakes that people have made over the past generations," he said, "then you hope not to make those same mistakes again."

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Steve Brettell's work credo is simple: "It's just a function of hard work. It's shoe leather. It's making phone calls. It's not giving up."

PROFILE Steve Brettell

President,
Alsation Land Co.

GETTING PERSONAL

Steve Brettell

Title: President, Alsation Land Co.

Age: 49

Education: Bachelor's, University of Kansas, 1976

Family: Wife, Claire; children, Steve, 23, Jack, 20, Nicole, 8

Hobbies: Collecting classic cars, scuba diving

Alsation's lineage: Early on the morning when he was going to buy land for State Farm's building in Independence, Brettell said, he needed a name for the company that would make the purchase. He chose Alsation because the Alsace Mountains on the border of France and Germany include the first land in the world that was surveyed for sale.