Gary, Velma Kuchta Set To Serve As Captain And Belle

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After volunteering for Riverboat Days for decades, Gary and Velma Kuchta will be serving as this years Captain and Belle. As part of the honor, they promote Yankton and the festival at numerous events throughout the summer. The Kuchtas said they were shocked when they found out about the honor.

After volunteering during Riverboat Days weekend in Yankton for decades, Gary and Velma Kuchta are now taking on their biggest duties of all, serving as this years Captain and Belle.

Velma Kuchta had served on the Riverboat Days board for nearly a decade as a secretary, while also helping out with behind-the-scenes aspects at the event.

Gary has volunteered driving the courtesy cart at the festival and has also helped out with behind-the-scenes work, as well.

"After I had retired from the Riverboat Days board, we just kept on volunteering for various Riverboat Days shifts," Velma said. "It's hard not to be involved with Riverboat Days after you've been involved for so many years."

Katie Greene, Riverboat Days board secretary, said board members all thought it would be a good idea to ask the Kuchtas to represent the event as Captain and Belle.

"They have always been very active in Riverboat Days," she said. "They're always willing to do everything and anything people ask them to do to help out."

The Riverboat Days board typically asks for nominations for Captain and Belle from the public beginning at the start of the year.

"The whole idea is for people to be nominated who have impacted Yankton and done things to promote Riverboat Days," she said. "The Captain and Belle have gone to various events throughout the summer and promoted the festival, so we typically look for people who already do that."

The Kuchtas said they were shocked when they found out about the honor around Easter.

"It was a pleasant surprise, to say the least," Gary said. "We had to stop and figure that there are so many other folks who would be just as deserving to be named Captain and Belle for the event."

Up until Riverboat Days weekend, the Kuchtas have gone to area parades, Relay for Life, the wellness conference in June and summer concerts in Yankton. They said they enjoy their time volunteering, but are also looking forward to the summer as Captain and Belle.

"The whole summer as Captain and Belle sounds fun," Velma said. "We have all sorts of different appearances to make, and we're not used to doing that kind of thing, so this is a whole new ball game for us."

Gary said he is more accustomed to driving around the Captain and Belle, and noted the tables have flipped on him.

"We're not going to be in the driver's seat anymore, so it will be fun," he said. "Velma and I just enjoy helping out whenever someone asks if they need a hand — that's what we do, we help."

Gary and Velma said that, initially, they didn't tell anyone about their recognition, and only told their children because they didn't want the word to slip out.

"When we did tell our children about the honor, we swore them to secrecy," Velma said.

The Kuchtas are both heavily involved in the community outside Riverboat Days. Velma volunteers at the hospital, while also working part-time at the Opsahl-Kostal Funeral Home. Gary also volunteers and works part-time doing maintenance for Royal Oaks condos. Both have been in Yankton for nearly all of their adult lives.

"I really enjoy the fact that the people in Yankton are all very friendly," Velma said. "I also like the Lewis and Clark Lake area. This is truly home."

Gary said that, although he enjoys traveling to other cities in the region, he always likes coming home to Yankton.

"We're very fortunate to be able to have great facilities in the community," he said. "We have great medical facilities and an education system that's second to none. I've always loved living here and I still enjoy living here — there is no place like home."