

# LOSING *a* LEADER

*With the passing of Paul Ecke Jr. the industry has lost much more than a poinsettia breeder.*



BY BRIDGET WHITE

**B**y mid-morning Monday, May 13th I had received the same forwarded E-mail a dozen times, as friends in the industry shared the sad news of Paul Ecke Jr.'s passing. Diagnosed less than a year ago with pancreatic cancer, Paul had been in pretty good health and kept a great attitude throughout his "illness." Just last November, at the OFA fall meeting, he joked with me about the treatments he was trying and about his lack of appetite. But, then again, those personally acquainted with Paul know that this was pretty typical of him.

Referred to lovingly around the Ranch as P2, a quick way for employees to distinguish Paul Junior from his son Paul III or P3, Paul had an easy smile; an open, inviting personality; and a genuine desire to help others. He might have been one of the most influential people in horticulture, but he seemed more like the guy next door.

## MR. POINSETTIA

It is no exaggeration to say that the "Paul Ecke" name is synonymous with poinsettias in every corner of the globe. Quite simply, Paul Ecke Jr. helped revolutionize the way poinsettias are bred, produced and sold. As president of the Ranch from 1963 to 1991, Paul Junior is credited with assembling the scientific, technical, administrative, production, and distribution and marketing staffs and systems that transformed a small family business into a floriculture leader. Not only did he help make poinsettias the best-selling potted plant in the world, but throughout his life, Paul and his staff have developed brilliant and sophisticated new colors with once-unthinkable performance and quality, creating an annual industry of approximately 65 million units.

Since his graduation from The Ohio State University in 1949 with a degree in horticulture, Paul Junior never paused in his quest for the very

finest poinsettias possible. He pioneered the use of greenhouses for growing poinsettias — producing disease-free plants faster and better than ever before. At the same time, Paul Junior spent countless hours and seemingly limitless energy participating in — and leading — many local, state and national floriculture associations. His commitment has been demonstrated over and over with such groups as the Ohio Florists' Association Short Course, the California State Florists Association, the Society of American Florists, the American Horticultural Society, the American Floral Endowment and numerous universities, earning him a reputation as a leader with extraordinary vision and foresight.

Along the way, Paul Ecke Ranch poinsettias have become synonymous with Christmas, graced the stages of "The Today Show" and "The Tonight Show," and decorated the White House and the Vatican.

## FROM THE INDUSTRY

Paul's greatest legacy is probably the effect he had on other people so the GPN editors thought it would be a fitting tribute if some of Paul's closest peers and friends honored him in their own words.

"What comes to my mind when I look back on Paul's career is what a phenomenal impact he had on not only our industry but on American culture. Almost everyone buys a poinsettia at Christmas, and Paul was the driving force behind establishing what has essentially become a new custom in our country. There's not many individuals who accomplish that in their lifetime."

— Joel Goldsmith  
Goldsmith Seeds, Gilroy, Calif.

"I have many fond memories of Paul — way too many to do justice here, but one of my favorite is from many years ago when I was a student and becoming aware of poinsettias. I

was watching the Tonight Show one evening. Bette Midler was a guest. When introduced, she came out, sat down on Johnny Carson's desk and stuck a poinsettia branch in her bosom. After that, I don't really remember what was said, but the scene was hilarious. I've seen Paul use that picture in many talks to illustrate the power of marketing. He loved it."

— Jim Barrett

GPN/University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla.

"Paul was one of those rare people who can be called a legend in his own time. He not only brought new products and methods to the industry, but also a passion for what he believed in. And to his credit, he was able to share his vision in such a way that people embraced it. If you shared his vision and passion, you had no alternative but to also embrace the man himself. He's left a legacy for all of us!"

— Stan Pohmer

Pohmer Consulting Group, Minnetonka, Minn.

"I have known of Paul since my college days during the 1970s. At that time and beyond, many of us looked at Paul as larger than life



1983 staff of Paul Ecke Ranch.

within our industry. It was not until years later that I realized Paul was a man that would look you in the eye and carry on a conversation while taking a sincere interest in what you might have to say. About two years ago, Paul took the time to stop at our greenhouses on a trip to northern New Hampshire. You might call it good business marketing on his part, but I still look at his visit as an honor. The kid in me still brought the camera out for my picture with Paul.”

— *Doug Cole*  
*D.S. Cole Growers Inc., Loudon, N.H.*

“The first time that I visited the Paul Ecke Ranch, I was impressed by two things. One, the greenhouses and offices were incredibly average. I expected the facilities to echo the stature of the company name and reputation. Secondly, I was really impressed by the quality and professionalism of the staff. Companies reflect the personality of the individuals that provide the leadership. Paul Junior built a company with a name that is synonymous with quality and professionalism because those were the values that he held.”

— *Jim Faust*  
*Clemson University, Clemson, S.C.*

“Paul was a terrific mentor. I don’t know where I would be personally or professionally without his influence. He truly made me a better person and a better floriculturist, and he did that for lots of people, and he did it because he wanted to, not because he wanted anything back or even any kind of acknowledgement. He just had this way about him that made you want to be involved; his enthusiasm for floriculture was contagious. And he didn’t just say the words. He provided opportunities; he made things happen. I hope some of us can carry that on.”

— *Terril Nell*  
*University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla.*

“I remember as a ‘young’ person in this industry being in awe of the Paul Ecke’s of the world...they seemed bigger than life. As I matured and got to know and enjoy Paul Ecke, he was an extremely approachable gentleman. I learned a lot from Paul during the time that I got to spend with him, and I thoroughly enjoyed those times. Paul

was a giant among men. He gave so much to our Industry and to mankind in general. I will miss Paul Ecke as will many others.”

— *Joe Boarini*  
*Grande Greenhouse, Inc.*  
*Ohio Florists’ Association, President*

Paul Ecke Jr. is survived by his

wife Maureen St. Croix Ecke; three children, Paul Ecke III, Lizbeth Ecke and Sara Ecke May; seven grandchildren; and an industry of friends and peers that love and will miss him.

A memorial service was held Friday, May 17th at the Magdalena Ecke YMCA in Encinitas. In tribute to Paul’s support of the floral

industry, the family has asked that well-wishers send flowers to someone they love or that they make a donation to the Paul Ecke Jr. Fellowship Fund c/o the American Floral Endowment. [GPN](#)

*Bridget White is editor of GPN.*