Ernesto Velez: A Champion for Colombia’s Greatest Resources

For someone who had such a sweeping impact on Colombian floriculture, Ernesto Velez will also be remembered for his many personal acts of generosity, his wide and easy smile and his devotion to his family and employees.

His death Sunday, March 21, after a year-long battle with pancreatic cancer, leaves the industry without its earliest and most vocal champion of the simple belief that the land on which your flowers grow and the people who grow them deserve your respect and protection. As chairman of Asocolflores for an unprecedented five terms, Veze shared that philosophy of social responsibility and environmental stewardship as he tirelessly promoted Colombian flowers and flower growers.

"Ernesto dedicated most of his time to Asocolflores … fueling ideas and putting forth proposals. He represented Asocolflores with great dignity at both national and international levels," said Augusto Solano, president of Asocolflores.

"Ernesto’s passing represents an irreparable loss, not only for his family, but also for Asocolflores and Colombian floriculture."

As comfortable and convincing as Velez was before a television camera in New York, a convention hall in Bogota or a college classroom in Florida, he was even more affecting one-on-one, quick with a smile and eager to listen — as long as he got a chance to tell you about his two loves: flowers and family.

Charles Kremp, AAF, remembers one drive with Velez to a dinner in Cartagena, Colombia. "At the beginning of the ride, I asked a question about the social side of the floral industry in Colombia," he said. "Ernesto was so excited about the opportunities and activities in which Asocolflores was involved that he slowed down to extend the trip and continued the conversation well into dinner."

Velez was equally passionate when talking about, and working with, his wife Lucie.

Lucie Velez joined her husband in spearheading the creation and implementation of the Florverde program. Flowers with the Florverde label carry the guarantee that they have been grown in conditions that meet the highest social and environmental standards. That program crystallized what Ernesto and Lucie had been doing on their own farm, just outside of Bogota. In 1980, they founded Suasuque, which grew to be a 35-acre operation, producing eight cut flowers. There, the integration of pest management practices and the use of biologic fertilizers helped Suasuque record some of the lowest levels of pesticides and chemicals among Asocolflores farms.

Employees too benefited from the couple's holistic and fair approach. According to a 2007 article in Greenhouse Grower, the company's wages have been in the top 10 percent among Asocolflores growers on a 10-year average, or 35 percent higher than the minimum wage in Colombia. And, worker turnover has been around 1 percent.

In awarding Ernesto and Lucie Velez the Paul Ecke Award in 2008, SAF also lauded their efforts beyond the farm. Lucie's concern for low-income families shattered by domestic violence inspired her to become the driving force behind Cultivating Peace in the Family, a conflict-management program for families, employers and the community. Cultivating Peace has trained approximately 30,000 flower workers and members of their families and communities.

"Ernesto was great supporter of SAF and truly a pillar of the Colombian floral industry," said SAF CEO Peter Moran. "I have been fortunate to work with Ernesto for many years and he was just an outstanding person who will be missed by so many."

He had also served on the American Floral Endowment board since 2004, and was a trustee.

At Proflora 2009, the couple was lauded with the "Life and Endeavors of a Flower Grower" award for being exemplary floriculturists and ideal trade association members. In January, the University of Florida presented Ernesto with the Scholar Award from the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences for being an outstanding alumus. He earned his post-graduate degree in agricultural economics there, after graduating from the University of California-Davis with a bachelor's in agronomy. After graduation, he spent 10 years working for and consulting with USAID, the World Bank, the Inter-American Bank and other international agrarian-focused financial institutions.

"What made Ernesto special was his great passion for so many different things: the quality of the flowers he grew, the flower industry and its community of people, his family and his country," said Red Kennicott, AAF, of Kennicott Brothers Co, in Chicago. "He loved people and he had a wonderful sense of humor. The flower industry will not be the same without Ernesto."

—Amanda Long
along@safnow.org