A Legendary Trio

Three floral industry ‘greats’ were given SAF’s highest honor, the Floriculture Hall of Fame

BY DREW GRUENBURG AND MARY WESTBROOK

The greatest honor in the floral industry was bestowed on Sept. 19 upon three individuals whose leadership and commitment to the industry embody the industry’s highest possible levels of integrity, service and excellence: Tom Butler, AAF, chairman of Teleflora; Herman Meinders, AAF, founder of American Floral Services; and Walter Preston, founder of Manatee Floral in Palmetto, Fla. The much anticipated announcement of the award, made each year during SAF’s annual convention (see p. 10) is a surprise to everyone in the audience with the exception of the family of the recipient.

Before announcing Meinders, SAF Awards Committee member and past SAF President Terril Nell, PhD., described a man “whose name is synonymous with hard work, common sense and following your dreams,” and whose life story is “a quintessentially American story of a meager beginning that turned into a larger than life success.”

Awards Committee member Bob Wilkins, AAF, of Delaware Valley Floral Group in Sewell, N.J., prefaced his announcement of Walter Preston by describing “a man who is a visionary who understood that florists, wholesalers, growers and suppliers had to come together and work with each other to make the industry better.”

Nell aroused the audience’s curiosity about the third honoree, Tom Butler, by describing an individual who “has represented the industry at the smallest retail shops . . . to the halls of Capitol Hill . . . and never misses a chance to promote the power of flowers and the work ethic of small business owners in the industry.”

The following are excerpts from the tributes delivered at the Awards dinner.

‘Selfless’ Entrepreneurial Spirit

AS DELIVERED BY TERRIL NELL, PH.D., AAF

Through a unique blend of tenacity and kindness, Herman Meinders epitomizes the spirit of the American dream and all that is possible when hard work and passion meet face-to-face. Originally from the small prairie town of Pipestone, Minnesota, Meinders’ formal education took place in Oklahoma and Florida, but his floral industry education was forged and tempered on the road. As a young man, Meinders traveled an average of 88,000 miles a year selling listings and ads for the National Florist Directory. On those trips he talked at length with florists, learning as much as he could about their businesses and their lives. He took careful notes at each stop where he kept track of the challenges florists faced as well as the owner’s interests and insights. In doing so he built long-term relationships that helped catapult his entrepreneurial spirit years later.

In 1970, with $500 and a 900-square-foot garage apartment, Herman Meinders launched American Floral Services (AFS), but then, as he told the audience after he was announced, “thought, ‘this is a mistake’ and wanted to quit.” A letter from then SAF Executive Director John Walker, “congratulating me and encouraging me to continue,” kept him moving forward, and within 15 years AFS was serving thousands of florists nationwide. AFS went on to pioneer new concepts in education and state of the art point of sale systems, and had expanded into more than 200 countries.
Launching a new company — and running it on a shoestring budget — was not easy, but it allowed Herman to implement some innovative ideas that had been percolating for years. Under Herman’s guidance, AFS pioneered new concepts in education, introducing the AFS Commentators seminars and the monthly Floral Finance newsletter. In the technology arena, AFS soon introduced state of the art point of sale systems. By the time AFS merged with Teleflora in 2000, the company had expanded into Canada, Mexico and 200 other countries, and had been recognized by then Oklahoma Governor George Nigh who declared December 5, 2000, as American Floral Services Day in Oklahoma.

Despite the company’s growth, Meinders remained a hands-on executive until his retirement, only too happy to roll up his sleeves and get the work done no matter how small the job. Through his travels early in his career Herman found out that florists were among the hardest working people in America, and he gladly walked in their shoes, knowing what it took to make a profit and survive.

Throughout his life he had contributed to Boy Scout projects, so he decided in 2005 to give his 6,000-acre ranch in increments to the Boy Scouts. It is now known as the Diamond H Scout Ranch where future generations come to learn about the value of service to others and respect for the land.

For his entrepreneurial spirit, his business wisdom, and his selfless temperament, SAF is proud to induct Mr. Herman Meinders into the Floriculture Hall of Fame.

‘Curious Mind’ Begets Innovation
AS DELIVERED BY BOB WILKINS, AAF

Walter Preston’s career is proof positive that when you dedicate your life to improving the world for others, you are able to achieve great things. As an industry leader and businessman, Preston built a reputation for honesty as he and his family set a high bar for producing and selling top quality products and for insisting on the highest caliber of customer service at his 120-year-old company, Manatee Floral Inc. Walter’s grandfather, the first Walter Preston, founded Manatee Lemon Company in 1892. Following a freeze in 1900 that killed the lemon trees, the company switched to oranges and grapefruit and also raised vegetables until 1946. In the 1930’s, Walter’s father, Whiting Preston, introduced gladiolus production.

But it was Walter himself who truly moved the mark when it came to floriculture. Following a tour of duty with the U.S. Navy during the Korean War, in 1954 Walter put his naturally curious mind to work at the company spending long hours studying and learning how to improve the company’s gladiolus production. His knowledge and expertise soon turned Walter into one of the industry’s pioneering leaders on many production and distribution issues with gladiolus. He helped develop processes to eliminate viruses in gladiolus and he was instrumental in advancing propagation of gladiolus bulbs via tissue culture. In the process, Manatee Floral Inc. became the largest gladiolus producer in the nation, planting as many as 20 million bulbs annually.

Preston’s dogged determination and his natural talent for innovating and risk taking soon helped him expand the company’s fresh flower production far beyond gladiolus, first into chrysanthemums and later into potted flowering plants, foliage plants and other fresh flowers.

But as Walter was building his business, he also never shied away from important issues that affected the entire floral industry. In the 1980’s he became a vocal leader in the industry’s effort to create a national marketing campaign. Walter was the co-chairman of Floraboard, the industry’s first attempt to pass legislation to collect funds for a national floral marketing program. Those efforts helped lay the foundation for the PromoFlor campaign, passed by Congress 1993. “I appreciate the kind words. Some, but not all, are deserved,” said Preston as he thanked SAF for the honor.

For his passion for innovation, his dedication to excellence and his focus on national marketing efforts, please help me welcome Mr. Walter Preston as the newest inductee into the Floriculture Hall of Fame.
A Legend — A Trio

Champion of the Florist” – always there when they need him, always understanding their issues and representing their cause. Another way he promoted the retail florist was through his ongoing and active lobbying on behalf of retailers before local, state and national political leaders. Often jokingly called Senator Butler for his confident demeanor and booming voice, Tom “went to bat” for the retail florist at every opportunity he had, supporting legislation to improve the business climate and opposing bills that could hurt the industry.

In countless leadership positions in multiple industry organizations, Tom has always shown the ability to bring groups together and build consensus, even on divisive issues.

While Tom is known far and wide for his dedication to the industry, he also is known for his dedication to family – his and your’s. Being part of a close knit family is one of Tom’s greatest joys, and he always has time to share family stories and hear yours.

For his unswerving support of retail florists, his decades-long advocacy for the floral industry and his devotion to friends and family, SAF is proud to induct Tom Butler into the Floriculture Hall of Fame.

A native of Detroit, Tom has held many high-level positions in the industry after initially thinking he might go into the priesthood. Tom was with FTD for 13 years where he held a variety of senior positions including director of the international division. He then worked for three years as vice president of sales and marketing at Syndicate Sales. He joined American Floral Services (AFS) in 1985 as executive vice president and then became president. When AFS merged with Teleflora in 2000 — a merger Tom was instrumental in making — he became chairman.

For nearly every year of his career, Tom has been on the road visiting florists, one at a time. He has visited close to 125 florists each year for the last 25 years. In doing so, he learned their names, heard about milestones in their lives, and got to know them and the issues and concerns they had. While visiting those shops, Tom acted as part counselor, part cheerleader and part therapist. He is considered by many to be the “Chief Champion of the Florist” – always there when they need him, always understanding their issues and representing their cause.

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See a full gallery of photos showing career highlights of the inductees, at www.safnow.org/moreonline.
MANY THANKS to the individuals and organizations who helped make SAF Palm Beach 2012 a success!

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