James R. Phillip, AAF: 1925 to 2010

Considered an industry visionary, James R. “J.R.” Phillip, AAF, chairman emeritus of Phillip’s Flowers, died June 22. He was 84. A hands-on shop manager, Phillip pushed for the streamlining of floral shipping methods while growing his parent’s shop into a Chicago institution.

Raised above his parents’ flower shop in Cicero, Ill., J.R. grew up watching his father, James, make little distinction between his passion for the business and his love of family. That sense of family commitment and hard work defined J.R.’s 61 years with Phillip’s Flowers, a 10-store operation throughout the Chicago suburbs, that under his leadership, earned retailer awards, best-of-Chicago honors and accolades from customers and industry peers.

While successfully running the shop and designing arrangements (including those McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc’s funeral and Pope John Paul II’s 1979 outdoor mass), J.R. also co-founded Flower Pak, Inc., a Chicago-area wholesale floral distributor affiliated with Phillip’s Flowers, and the Metro Chicago Florist Delivery Coop.

“J.R. Phillip was the ultimate ‘hands on’ manager who could also see the big picture and was always looking for a better way to do things,” said Kennicott Brothers CEO Red Kennicott. The two Chicago businessmen worked together to establish the first custom-pack program for shipping flowers from Holland 35 years ago. “The flower industry has lost one of its greatest innovators.”

The family drive remained in force when J.R. handed over day-to-day management to brother, Russ, and sons, Jim, Don and Baxter who are guiding the next generation in the family operation.

Hard work is a distinguishing trait in the Phillip family, as described in this article, published when shop was named Illinois Retailer of the Year in 2005 by the Illinois Retail Merchants Association (IRMA).

Family is paramount, and employees and customers are treated with the same care and respect. J.R. set up a pension fund for his staff and many have stayed decades, a loyalty that florist Sam Viviano, AAF, credits to J.R.’s leadership.

“He was a visionary in the floral industry that few could match,” said Viviano, who grew Bartz Viviano Florists into a six-store operation in the Toledo area. Now a consultant to other retailers, Viviano sat on Phillip’s Flowers board for 25 years, seeing firsthand the business sense and personal touch that helped the company become a multi-million dollar Chicago institution. “He was a giant in our industry and my mentor; I could always learn something emulating J.R.”

J.R. is survived by his wife of 59 years, Mary B. Phillip, sister, Lee Phillip Bell, brother Russell Phillip (Lorelei); children Jim (Gwen), Don (Sandy) and Baxter (Martha) Phillip; eight grandchildren and one great grandson — many of whom are leading the family business into its fourth generation.

A memorial service will be June 29, at 7:15 at Christ Church of Oak Brook. Floral expressions are welcome, and memorial contributions may be sent to The James and Helen Phillip Scholarship Fund, c/o American Floral Endowment, 1601 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. The fund was established by J.R.’s sister, Lee, who in 2008 honored their parents by providing scholarship assistance to those in need who are interested in careers in the retail sector of the floral industry.

To read the Chicago Tribune obituary, click here.

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