Any attempt to sum up the accomplishments of Thomas Powell, AAF, AIFD, with a list of impressive titles held, awards won, presidential inaugurations coordinated, high-powered customers wowed, students taught, money raised and designers left slack-jawed by his work would still be missing what many argue was the true magic of working with him: his grace, kindness and sense of humor. For as many big-deal, big-picture efforts he spearheaded at the American Institute of Floral Designers and SAF, Powell was just as powerful on the personal level: making others feel like part of that big picture.

Powell died June 21 after a long battle with Alzheimer's. His death at age 77 leaves the industry without one of its finest designers, event leaders and champions of education, and Washington, D.C., without a successful business owner who worked alongside his partner, David Hope, AAF, AIFD, for four decades (and more recently alongside their dogs, Tulip and Jonquil) at The Flower Gallery.

"Once you met him, you just gravitated toward him," said Laurie Lemek, AIFD, PFCI, of Delaware Valley Floral. Lemek met Powell at an SAF convention 30 years ago and immediately saw the makings of a perfect mentor. They became colleagues when Lemek joined AIFD, and the friendship deepened. "He was as an amazing designer, an amazing dancer and just an incredibly sweet man who believed in paying it forward through education and friendship to young designers."

Rich Salvaggio, AAF, AIFD, PFCI, was one such young designer "decades ago," he said, when Powell asked him to help with some sympathy designs at an AIFD event. "I said to him in astonishment, 'You want me to help you?' And he said, in just the warmest way, 'C'mere kid, I've seen the work you do and I like it.'"

Now the vice president of industry relations and floral publications for Teleflora, Salvaggio considers that moment his true welcome to the industry. "I don't think I'd be where I am today without having him as a mentor. He worked tirelessly to promote education and I think of his goals when I set my own."

Hope knows all about that magnetic pull Powell had, having watched him inspire and instruct hundreds of students and designers all over the world—and having felt it himself when he first walked through the doors of The Flower Gallery in 1969 with his roommate at American University. The roommate asked Powell if he was hiring, and soon both college students were working there. A few months later, Hope said Powell and he and Powell "fell in love over Mother’s Day”—a true testament to their chemistry, given the less-than-romantic, tense mood in most shops around the busy holiday.

Their relationship was put on hold, when Hope took off for a planned, extended backpacking trip around Europe with his roommate. The trip was meandering and Hope stayed in Zurich longer than planned. Sitting in a youth hostel there, he recalled, he heard his named called over the intercom for a phone call. He was certain the authorities had tracked him down to deliver bad news, since "no one, not even I, expected me to still be in Zurich that day.” It was Powell.

"Tom never let me forget that my first words 'Oh, it's you.'" The two talked for a few minutes, as Hope grew increasingly curious about Powell's international-tracking skills. Then Powell asked, "Can you meet me downtown for a drink?" Powell had come to Zurich — and Hope would never leave The Flower Gallery again.

"Working alongside him was like working with your best friend who trusted you to do your best work, without ever hovering," Hope said. Of course, Powell was often on the road. He created the FTD exhibit at the 1984 Interfloral World Congress in Hamburg, Germany. In 1989, he became the first designer for the U.S. to compete behind the Iron Curtain at an international flower competition in Estonia. And while he delivered flowers to Kennedys 1989, he became the first designer for the U.S. to compete behind the Iron Curtain at an international flower competition in Estonia. And while he delivered flowers to Kennedys without one of its finest designers, event leaders and champions of education, and Washington, D.C., without a successful business owner who worked alongside his partner, David Hope, AAF, AIFD, for four decades (and more recently alongside their dogs, Tulip and Jonquil) at The Flower Gallery.

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Powell's reaching out to pull others into the profession was a defining trait, and one key to his involvement in helping co-found the AIFD Foundation in 1985, the year after he’d served as AIFD president. It also made him an effective and calm design chair at two SAF conventions and SAF’s coordinator of floral decorations at four presidential inaugurations in the 80s and 90s. Salvaggio recalls his ability at the Clinton inauguration to get “a bunch of people who don’t like being told what to do” to create massive amounts of streamlined designs without turning the process into an assembly line. “He just had this magical way of painting a picture, without dictating every step, and then walking away and leaving it in our hands to do it right,” Salvaggio said.

“Tom’s sense of humor prevailed during the inaugurations,” said SAF’s chief operating officer Drew Gruenburg. “The hours were long and the pace was pretty intense, but Tom was always ready with a laugh and a smile to diffuse the tension.”

For those efforts and more, Powell was the recipient of many industry awards.

In 1993, AIFD presented him with its Distinguished Award for Service. He was honored with SAF’s Paul Ecke, Jr. Award in 2003. He served on the board of the American Horticultural Society, coordinated a gala there and received the group’s Frances Jones Poetker Award in 1999.

Those awards, among others, capture the official contributions of Powell, but many don’t have to look to plaques and certifications to know how the florist and friend changed their lives.

Dwight Larimer, AAF, sees evidence of Powell’s wisdom daily, but not just in his work at Design Master color tool. Back when he and his wife, Dawn, were dating and going through a rough patch, Powell asked him about his girlfriend. During a conversation that lasted until 2 a.m., Powell “coached and encouraged me to take a deep breath and let my heart prevail and blow past the little stuff that had wrecked our dating relationship,” Larimer said about the man who would do his wedding flowers just a year later.

“I am not afraid to share that story,” Larimer said, “because that was the man and person that Tom Powell was, deep, caring, understanding and loving.”

His memorial service will be at 2 p.m., Tuesday, June 29, at the Chapel of the Presidents at the National Presbyterian Church, 4101 Nebraska Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20016. Contributions may be made to the AIFD Foundation, c/o Lona Christoffers, 7960 E. Kiowa Circle, Mesa, AZ 85209.