Many of you are very familiar with Guenther’s generosity in the Denver community, but I’m here to talk about another community that benefitted from his generosity as well as his brilliant mind and business acumen: The floral industry.

On the retail side of the floral industry there are about 16,000 shops. Among those, about 7,000 are SAF members – and Bouquets is among that group. Our purpose at SAF is to help florists be more successful, and to get more consumers to buy more flowers more often. Among those 7,000 members, a very small slice – about 80 or so at a time – volunteer their time away from their shops to serve on our committees and councils for a three year term. Twice a year, they leave their shops to come to SAF and help us help the industry be more successful. Among those business owners, Guenther Vogt exhibited a passion and commitment to our cause that was surpassed by few.

BJ wrote in the tribute that Guenther was opinionated. The opinions Guenther brought to SAF were fueled by a passion to make flower shops more successful. Not just his own, but everyone’s.

By the time Guenther got involved with SAF, Bouquets was thriving, and BJ and Guenther wanted to give back. Guenther was elected to serve a three-year term on SAF’s Retail Council. There, he helped develop new programs and services to make retailers more successful. He was also asked to serve on what was called the Business and Economic Trends committee. Now, assignment to this committee would sometimes elicit an audible groan from those who got it. It’s a numbers crunching post. While other committees give you a role in producing the association’s most visible programs – our national public relations campaign, our monthly magazine, our annual convention — the Business and Economic Trends committee had you locked in a room, eight hours at a stretch, analyzing floral industry sales data, looking for trends and then summarizing those trends, so SAF could make sure we were keeping our fingers on the pulse of the latest trends.

It’s a committee some asked to be removed from … Not Guenther. In fact, a longtime chair of that committee, who holds his doctorate in agricultural economics, told me this week that Guenther was a gifted statistician and the best retail member of that committee he’d ever worked with.

Guenther earned the American Academy of Floriculture designation in recognition of his service to the floral industry, as well as his local community, in 2005. But Guenther’s contributions to our industry didn’t just happen while sitting in a conference room. He had a genuine passion for seeing other florists succeed, and he
and BJ are together a seemingly bottomless well of ideas for growing their own business and helping other florists do the same.

We have this annual marketing contest in the magazine, called the Marketer of the Year award, where we invite SAF members to submit what they deem their best and most successful marketing campaigns, which get judged by an esteemed panel of floral industry peers. It’s a big deal in our industry – the winner gets a $5,000 cash prize, and we make it very exciting for them. After the winner is chosen in August of each year, we keep it a secret until our annual convention the next month, where we announce the winner before an audience of three or four hundred of their peers. We bring them up to the stage, I tell the audience about their marketing campaign and our cash prize sponsor – Dwight Larimer, who’s president of another floral industry company – hands over the $5,000 check. It’s very exciting for everyone.

Bouquets entered and won in 2002 with an extraordinarily creative and successful effort to capture Denver’s high profile event décor work. Seven years later – in 2009 – they entered again, with a completely new campaign. This time, though, they didn’t enter to win. In fact, BJ told me they entered presuming they wouldn’t win because they’d be disqualified since they’d won before. Guenther’s only motivation for entering: to share the idea with as many florists as possible. Bouquets had had so much success with their idea, that Guenther wanted other florists to experience that success, too.

Well, they did win – it was an even more brilliant marketing idea than their first one, and there’s nothing in the rules to disqualify someone from entering or winning twice. So, once again, award presentation time comes around. We announce BJ and Guenther, who come to the stage and, just like in 2002, I tell the story of their new campaign, and Dwight – thankfully, still sponsoring that cash prize—gives them the check before an audience of about 400 of their peers. (Now, remember, this is 2009 – there’s not a business owner in the audience who isn’t thinking, “Man, what I could do with $5,000 …”) BJ says a few words of thanks. Then Guenther comes to the podium and announces that Bouquets would be giving half the prize money to the Society of American Florists to support its national marketing programs.

This was news to BJ, who was as impressed and as shocked as everyone else in the audience. BJ told me the other day that Guenther told him afterwards that he kept it to himself in case BJ didn’t agree with the idea (but he did).

Now, if you’re on the supply side of the floral industry — you grow flowers, or manufacture ribbon, or vases — and you’re standing in front of several hundred potential customers, you have plenty to gain from such a public display of generosity. But that wasn’t the case with Bouquets. They didn’t have any customers in the audience. Guenther told BJ he did it hoping it might encourage other retailers to follow suit and contribute to SAF’s efforts to get more people to buy more flowers more often.
As BJ put it to me the other day, “Sometimes when Guenther got a passion for an idea, he was going to do it no matter what.”

The floral industry has lost one of its finest, most brilliant minds, and fun loving and generous hearts. But Guenther’s influence lives on in the legacy of ideas he left behind and the generosity he has no doubt inspired in others in our industry.