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Storks to close shop, retire after many years

Tammy Real-McKeighan News Editor Updated Aug 3, 2016



Kent and Joyce Stork enjoy a fun moment with their Boston terrier, Apollo. The Storks plan to retire and move to Las Vegas to be

Fremont High coach Al Bahe would say he didn't believe in flowers.

But once a year, he'd go to Kent's Flowers in Fremont to order a single rose, then return a week later to pick it up for his wife, Patti. The last time he came, Bahe could barely get out of his car, but he came in to order the rose. After his death, flower shop owners Kent and Joyce Stork told Bahe's children about the rose.

They already knew and brought back photographs taken every year of a rose in a vase with Patti sitting next to it. Both of the Bahes are gone now, but the Storks have carried on their own tradition.

"Every year, we have placed a wreath at their graves and the wreath always has one rose," Joyce said.

The Storks have had a long tradition of serving local customers, but at the end of this month they are retiring and closing their store after 39 years. Aug. 27 will be the last day for fresh flowers. They'll sell store fixtures after that and retire to Las Vegas to be closer to family.

With that closing will come an end to a business, whose owners have been known internationally for their knowledge of African violets and, at least locally, for shop dogs like Charlie the dachshund and Apollo, the Boston terrier, who've playfully greeted joyous customers and comforted those grieving the loss of loved ones.

Originally from Arlington, Kent Stork met his wife, Joyce, who's from Gering, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. While in college, they competed in the flower show at the Nebraska State Fair.

"He won virtually every class he entered in design," she said.

And although the Storks planned to teach school, the fair's flower department superintendent helped plant a different seed in their minds.

"If you ever want a job in a flower shop, instead of teaching, let me know," he told Kent.

The Storks married in 1970. He taught high school English and speech and directed plays in Lexington for a year, before they moved to Lincoln. There, he began working at a flower shop and she taught school.

In 1974, he began working at Miles Fremont Greenhouse, a job he'd have for three years. They commended owner Bob Miles as a fine fellow to learn the trade from and someone who had high standards on flowers.

"He taught Kent a lot of things," Joyce said.

Joyce taught seventh grade for five years at Trinity Lutheran School in Fremont. In 1977, they opened their shop in Arlington.

"Kent worked the first two years alone and then when we were expecting our first son, I stopped teaching and we worked together from then on," she said.

They had many Fremont customers and got the contract for flowers to be sold at the gift shop of what's now Fremont Health Medical Center. They opened a second shop in Fremont in 1990 and ran both until she had back surgery.

"We couldn't keep both places open, so we closed the shop in Arlington and moved the whole operation here," she said.

By the 1980s, their African violet business was rapidly growing. Their interest in the small purple flowers began after a pastor friend in Lexington gave them some African violets. That first plant didn't fare so well.

"We killed it," she said.

Then Kent got a book about African violets from the library. After that, they grew them successfully and in the '80s were shipping them across the country. They'd show African violets at the Omaha Flower and Garden Show, with plants selling as fast as they could get them out of the boxes.

At the same time, their floral business was growing and they knew they'd have to make a trim somewhere. So they've have to cut back on the African violet business.

It did remain important, however, as the Storks made trips to lecture to violet societies in Hong Kong and Russia. They competed at National African Violet shows, winning many top awards. In 1989, they were awarded a bronze medal by the African Violet Society, the highest award for horticultural achievement.

In the 1990s, they started writing for the African violet magazine. That led to their book, "You CAN grow African Violets," which came out in 2007.

The years flew by. The Storks had a second son in the 1980s. Their floral business continued to flourish.

Throughout the years, they've seen various trends. Joyce recalls when they sold \$10 arrangements in the 1970s, mostly mums, carnations and baby's breath. Kent recalls when mauve and country blue were popular and customers wanted floral arrangements in those colors, even though flowers didn't come in those hues. There were years, when orange, bronze and yellow were out of style, and customers didn't want even autumn arrangements in those colors. Now, those colors are popular.

In the last couple of years, customers have wanted purple flowers.

Wedding flowers have changed, too.

"When we first started, everybody brought in pictures of their cousin's wedding. Everybody was doing what everybody else had done recently," Joyce said.

Brides would follow examples from floral books that came out every 10 years and helpers typically got the single-carnation corsages.

Then businesswoman Martha Stewart hit the airwaves and became the driving force for primarily roses packed in beautiful, spherical bouquets with no greenery.

The Internet and Pinterest would change the floral business.

"I don't need a book today, because brides come in with Pinterest pages they've collected," Joyce said. "I can very quickly figure out who the bride is and what she would like. I can read her personality just by looking at the flowers she wants. I can see if she's going to be a rustic

bride or really sophisticated. You know so much more about her personal taste, because she's already got the pictures."

The Internet has made the business more difficult as photographs can be deceiving with flowers manipulated and made to look good – on one side—for the camera. Photographs also can make a smaller bouquet look larger and a larger one not look as valuable.

What probably hasn't changed much at the flower shop are the friendly pups who've greeted customers for years.

The Storks have had various dachshunds throughout the years, but the best known probably was Charlie, a rescue dog. During prom season, a dog at the shop would play with guys ordering corsages for their prom dates.

Charlie would do that, but when grieving families came in to order flowers for a loved one's funeral, the dog would sit quietly by them.

Apollo has done the same. Typically, he greets incoming customers, then goes under a counter, coming out to say "goodbye" when they leave.

As they prepare to say "goodbye," the Storks look back on many fruitful years, but look forward to retirement.

"After 39 years of mostly working six or more days a week, it's time to have some time for ourselves," he said.

The Storks note that they're on their feet all day long. Their jobs are more physically demanding than most people realize and dirty, because they work in dirt.

"I don't have to lift weights," Joyce added. "I could wrestle a lumberjack from having to carry buckets of water."

The couple has two sons, a daughter-in-law and grandson, whom they want to see more.

"For the last 2 ½ years, we're very conscious of how tied down we are," Kent said. "We have a grandson, who's a little over 2 years old and we can't go see him, because we have to work."

They have other goals.

The Storks may work part time. Kent, who's appeared in three productions at the Omaha Community Playhouse and is auditioning for another, has looked into amateur theater in the Las Vegas area.

They will miss their customers.

"My biggest concern as we retire is that our customers still get the same service they came to expect," she said. "A long time ago, Kent told a group that his goal in growing African violets was to make the best, better. And that's really been the way he approached flowers, too.

"The flowers had to be the freshest. We had to handle them so they'd last as long as it was physically possible and they had to be arranged as perfectly as we could do it. That's been our motto. I think it's been the thing that built our business."

Tammy McKeighan

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