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Don't Just Sit There. Go Make Some.

John Friel



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Horticulture and I have lost another old friend. Paul Babikow died at 82 in December.

Paul, like other family members, did a lot for the green industries. He helped organize and host two Perennial Plant Association symposia, and volunteered time to the Maryland Nursery & Landscape Association. By my count, about a dozen commercial growing companies in four states can trace their roots to Babikow Greenhouses in Baltimore.

Paul was a smart, funny, complex, generous man. He ran competitively. He was an artist who painted big, abstract canvases, but as a passionate plantsman, his favorite work of art was his home garden. The subject of magazine articles, it

featured unusual plant combinations, grasses, natives and colorful modern metal sculptures of his design.

"He was non-stop," his daughter Amy said. "I don't know where he got his energy."

Like his late brother Oliver, better known as Buzz, Paul left the business for some years. After college, he worked as a statistician and analyst for the State of Maryland. But both brothers eventually gravitated back to growing.

"It gets in your blood," Buzz told me. "It draws you back."

A big proponent of education, Paul discreetly helped relatives' children attend college, took part in founding a Quaker elementary school, and supported an internship program that matches ag and hort students with participating farms and nurseries.

Unlike his more conservative siblings, Paul loved to live large. He drove a Mercedes convertible, kept a well-stocked wine cellar and greatly enjoyed fine dining with friends, at home or at the best restaurants he could find.

At home, his specialties included beef bourguignon and crab cakes. Amy remembers cooking together, "Just the two of us in the kitchen, dancing around each other, never in each other's way."

A highlight of my friendship with Paul involved a memorable meal. One summer day over 30 years ago at Longwood Gardens, I met him and two other nurserymen: Ron Strasko, recently retired owner of Creek Hill Nursery, and C. Dale Hendricks, co-founder of North Creek Nurseries.

After lunch—with wine, naturally—we decided a bottle of champagne would be the perfect dessert. That bottle led to two (possibly three) more. My memory is (surprise!) a tad vague on the rest of the day, but we definitely lingered

until long after sunset and pretty much closed the gardens. I know for a fact that at some point I climbed a tree, which I also know for a fact is, um, frowned upon at public gardens.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river, and he’s not the same man.” Could we wade into that metaphoric river and recreate that fondly recalled afternoon?

In a word, no. Longwood is no longer the same venue. It was already a fabulous public garden, but today it’s the Disney World of horticulture. No doubt numerous cameras are now discreetly deployed and we’d have been escorted out, at the very least, before I got both feet off the ground. Even then, it’s good I chose to scramble up one of the thousands of trees on the grounds, not one of the soaring tropicals in the conservatories. That would absolutely have gotten me busted and deservedly so.

And then there are the actors involved. The three survivors are all over 70 and it’s safe to say our tree-climbing years are behind us. Champagne consumption is the only part of that day still eligible for reiteration.

Can any day, any experience, be duplicated? Can a person be replaced? Fortunately for employers, an employee can be; but not, in a deeper sense, a person or a personality.

It’s always a sad shock to lose an interesting and valuable human being, let alone an old friend. No one has any of those to spare. But it’s heartening to realize that the green industries will keep growing them, keep drawing them, just as surely as we produce new plants.

Interesting, intelligent people seem to thrive in the humid, oxygen-rich environments that nurture our products—especially when forward-thinking industry members encourage and attract them.

RIP, Paul. Thank you for your friendship, your vision, and especially for the memories. **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.