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John McClung touched many lives in 77 years

By

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John McClung, who retired a decade ago as the president and CEO of the Texas Produce Association, spent a career in the produce industry with stops at the USDA and the United Fresh Produce Association. But he began his working life as a reporter, was an accomplished bird watcher, bed & breakfast hotelier and woodworker, and spent much of his career mentoring and helping others in his signature collaborative way.

He passed away in the late hours of the evening on Oct. 2 in South Texas as a result of complications from Parkinson Disease. His wife of 53 years, Judy McClung, noted that he had many passions, and their life was filled with great experiences and geographic diversity.



Richard Edmund Lyng, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, with John McClung.

Both Judy and John McClung grew up in Tucson, AZ, but did not meet until their early 20s. Mr. McClung was born on Nov. 17, 1943, graduated from the local high school and enrolled at the nearby University of Arizona where he studied journalism. He took a hiatus from his studies and joined the Army for a couple of years, though Judy admits this part of his life is a bit fuzzy as she did not know

him then. “When I met him, he was back at the university finishing his degree and bartending at a local place. I could get all the drinks I wanted,” she quipped.

The couple got married in 1968 and were living in San Francisco the following year when their son, John, was born. Mr. McClung was working as a reporter for UPI. Soon thereafter, he applied for and received a grant to get his Master’s Degree in Mass Communications at the University of Minnesota. After graduating, the job market was tight, so the McClungs stayed in Minnesota and John got a job with a publishing company. In 1973, he was transferred to Washington, D.C. Initially, he went alone as Judy was pregnant and stayed in Minnesota until their daughter, Janna, was born. Reunited in Washington, the family moved to Maryland with Mr. McClung spending a handful of years as the Washington Bureau Chief for Miller Publishing Company, a division of the American Broadcasting Company.

In the 1980s, Mr. McClung spent seven years as an appointee at USDA during the Reagan Administration, first as director of information and legislative affairs for the Food Safety and Inspection Service and then as director of information for all of USDA. He joined United in 1987 and served in several roles, leaving in 2000 as vice president for industry relations/government relations.

Mr. McClung moved to Texas to become president and CEO of what was then the Texas Produce Association. He not only began the transition of TPA to Texas International Produce Association, but he also oversaw the Texas Produce Marketing Cooperative, the Texas Produce Export Association, and managed the Federal Marketing Orders for Texas citrus and onions.

Judy McClung noted that the move to Texas was a great stop on the McClungs’ ultimate plan to move back to their home state of Arizona. “We were halfway there,” she joked. “But we never made it.”

In Texas, they bought and opened a bed and breakfast, which was a lifetime dream of John’s. “He wanted to open one in rural Arizona when we first married, but my dad said no,” Judy recalled.

John did open his little inn, but he continued to work as Judy ran the operation. “He helped out, but he had a fulltime job.”



John McClung (right)

with Bret Erickson (left) of J&D Produce and Dante Galeazzi and Lilly Garcia of the Texas International Produce Association.

Judy said he was an “avid” birdwatcher but she always called him a “rabid” bird watcher. “He would go anywhere to see a bird that he could add to his list. We spent a lot of time in South America and Latin America watching birds,” she said, admitting that it was his passion and she went along for the ride to experience different places and countries.

She said John got into bird watching when the family lived in Maryland. “He was always a hunter. Duck hunting in Arizona and he also went quail hunting in Maryland. From there he got interested in birds.”

She said his career with United gave the couple the opportunity to travel to many places where John could pursue that passion.

Many industry members appreciated the opportunity to weigh in on Mr. McClung’s life and several themes emerged as they discussed his impact on them and the industry. Of course, many people mentioned his bird watching passion, but they also described a calm, intelligent man who was focused on getting things done and helping others. Many considered Mr. McClung a mentor and a great facilitator of compromise and problem solving.

Tom Stenzel, current president and CEO of United Fresh Produce Association, came to his position when Mr. McClung was already employed at the association: “John gave me what may be the very best advice I ever got on my first day at United. He said, ‘Tom, you think you’ve come to work for the produce industry, but we’re actually a group of dozens of separate industries. Remember that every commodity has its own particular needs.’ I still share that advice with others today, as it helps us remember that we’re a coalition of different interests, not a homogenous group like corn, soybeans or cotton.”

Stenzel continued: “A fond memory is one Saturday John took many of us on staff to the Chesapeake Bay to watch some special birds migrating south for the winter. Horseshoe crabs were laying their eggs on the shoreline, and the birds were chowing down to stock up energy for the flight thousands of miles south. Then, there was that Monday morning when the team was talking about what each other did on the weekend. John said he went to Alaska to see a bird. For the weekend. And back in the office Monday!”

Matt McInerney, who spent his career with Western Growers, often worked with Mr. McClung as fellow produce association leaders. “I knew John for more than 30 years and the first word that comes to mind is collegial. He was a calm, strategic thinker that would always roll up his sleeves and get the job done. He was one of the architects of the DRC (Dispute Resolution Corporation), which is a very important industry tool. He really was a brilliant guy. On a personal note, he was a birder and would often stop and point out some obscure bird in a tree and give you its detailed background. He always seemed to have a keen eye on the horizon, searching for birds or solutions to produce industry issues.”

Marshall Matz, general counsel to United Fresh: “John was just beloved, pre-partisan politics. A birder at heart, he helped put United on the map in the agriculture world. Tom Stenzel has built United tremendously, but John was there at the beginning. He was instrumental in putting United on the political map.”

Bret Erickson followed Mr. McClung as the president of the Texas International Produce Association: “John McClung was an amazing human being. He was one of the most influential mentors and bosses I have ever had. He was absolutely one of the kindest most gentle people you would ever meet. And he was so good at mentoring young up and coming professionals; so many folks have told me over the years how John had encouraged them to continue their education and focus on their writing skills. John was an incredible writer himself and he was very insistent that strong writing skills and the ability to convey ideas simply and clearly was one of the most important tools you could have in your kit. After I took over, for the first couple years, everywhere I traveled, people would say ‘Oh, you’re the new John! Wow, you have really big shoes to fill!’ It was honestly quite nerve wracking to serve on various boards and committees where John had served; he was very well respected for his intelligence and insight and toughness. And boy oh boy, he could be rough and tough when he had to, but mostly John was a kind and compassionate man who loved his wife, Judy, their children and all their animals.”

He continued: John was one of the most distinguished bird watchers in North America and he had some great stories about his bird watching adventures... One of the primary reasons he chose to take the Texas Produce Association job was because it was located in the Rio Grande Valley, which is a well-known area for some of the best bird watching in the country.”

Alan Siger of Consumer Fresh Produce and a former chair of United Fresh: “He was a great guy... a low-key guy that could always work both sides of the aisle. John was very instrumental in getting the retailers aboard when we were having some trouble with the PACA (Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act). It could have split the industry, but John was able to work with both sides. In Yiddish, we call him a mensch’, which means a good guy.”

Chris Schlect of the Northwest Horticultural Council: “John was always open and candid, with a strong dedication to the growers and shippers for whom he worked. I fondly remember many chance meetings — over many years — with John at conventions of United and PMA where we caught up on the issues of the day and swapped political tales from inside the Beltway.”

Dante Galeazzi, current president and CEO of TIPA: “I remember when I got the call from John in 2008 to serve on the Texas Produce Association Board of Directors. I was 24 years old at the time, and I thought ‘No way am I qualified’ and nearly refused the position. But John wouldn’t let me quit. He saw something in me that I did not even see in myself yet. John told me it was not about my age or that I had lived in Texas less than a year. It was about contributing and participating. It was about doing what is best for the industry and the community... Nearly a decade after that, I ended up working for the association and I only hope that I can have that same impact on others someday. John did not just talk the talk, but he lived a creed. He was serious about doing the right thing,”

Bryan Silbermann, former president and CEO of Produce Marketing Association: “The most vivid memory I have involved a trip that was so uniquely John. It was a morning drive to the Bombay Hook Nature Reserve in Delaware around 5 a.m. one morning... a rather rare bird was expected to stop at Bombay Hook on its migration from the southern hemisphere up to Canada. While I cannot remember what the bird was, the other details of that early, dark morning meeting remain vivid. There we were, standing on a viewing platform, watching this gem of nature make its stop on a predictable route halfway across the world. John showed us the bird through his monoscope and explained its journey in minute detail. His voice and face were so animated as he described why the moment was so special and why he thought little of driving hundreds of miles to share migrations of other birds too.”

Victoria Backer, formerly with United Fresh: “John, along with Tom Stenzel, hired me at United Fresh in 1997. It was my first ‘real’ job out of college and I started as an industry relations assistant (staying on in different roles for 20 more years). John was an exceptional boss and mentor — smart, kind, savvy about association matters, and cared about the stuff that mattered. He had high standards for a quality work product, but through him, I learned perspective. I remember a few times having to bring an issue to him, and being a young professional, that could be scary. John never got mad. He took time to coach me and work through problems. Sometimes John liked to pretend like he was a curmudgeon, but he really wasn’t. As such, I nicknamed him ‘McMuffin,’ although I’m not sure I ever called that to his face.”

Pete Olson of USDA: “I was a new ag attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. John brought me up to give a presentation on U.S.-Mexico produce trade trends. It continues to be one of the most important bilateral ag trade relationships in the world. John saw the big picture and was passionate about his work. He had an outsized impact on the industry and Texas agriculture.”

Robert Keeney, ag consultant, formerly with both USDA and United Fresh: “I worked with John in each of his many capacities representing the fresh produce industry. I fondly remember John’s sharp wit with his bit of sarcasm at times. John was steadfast in his support of the produce industry, love of family and of course love of birds. He was skilled in advocating solutions that worked for all parties whether they be from Texas, the U.S., Canada or Mexico. A true leader of the North American fresh produce industry. All of us are better to have known and worked with John. He is one industry leader that will be remembered for all time.”

Harris Cutler of Race-West Company: “I am but one of thousands of produce people that had the opportunity to spend time with John and to benefit from his patient demeanor, strong wit, and brilliant mind. His family should be blessed with many happy occasions ahead and move forward knowing that he lived a life with tremendous meaning.”

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