

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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In Memoriam: Al Reilly

Edited Jennifer Zurko



Monuments in the form of greenhouse structures varying in size, shape and purpose help define urban and rural landscapes coast-to-coast while serving as material testimony to the business and personal acumen of the late Albert “Al” Reilly, who passed away October 17 with his wife Pam, daughter Sarah, and son Rich by his side.

For more than three decades, Al literally forged a national and international legacy—New York to California and stretching beyond northern and southern borders—as a Rough Brothers’ executive, reflecting a business sense and humanitarian passion that will last as long as flowers are grown. It’s an impressive list of accomplishments—commercial and retail garden centers form the legacy alongside historic projects like the U.S. Botanic Garden on the Mall in Washington, D.C., New York Botanic Garden in the Bronx, and conservatories at Longwood and Huntington Gardens on the east and west coasts.

Al walked away from a successful career as an NCAA football coach in 1977 and bought Cincinnati-based Rough Brothers, a small regional manufacturer of greenhouse structures founded in 1931. After years of steady growth, Al began to realize a broader vision, growing the company from its Midwestern roots to today’s international operation with manufacturing facilities in Ohio, North Carolina and Shanghai, China.

The guiding philosophy behind the success of Al Reilly is simple, according to Harlan Knosher, then the athletic director at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. It was Harlan who hired Al (then “Alby”) as head football coach in 1971, making him the youngest NCAA football coach in the country.

“Alby insisted that you are not doing a boy a favor if you are accepting less than his best,” said Harlan, “and that attitude was at the heart of his coaching success. He turned around a losing program, finishing undefeated in 1976, winning the Division III Midwest Conference with a team ultimately ranked in the Top 10 in the country. Alby was the finest coach in my 40 years at Knox; he was brilliant, demanding, but loving. And for good measure, he was the head coach of women’s basketball and men’s track. His championship football team was inducted into the Knox-Lombard Athletic Hall of Fame in 2012 and Alby will be inducted as an individual this fall.”

Prior to coaching at the college level, Al won the Vermont High School State Championship in football and was named Vermont Coach of the Year.

Al applied the same philosophy to his business, giving his best and expecting the best in return. “Al always stood behind his products,” said Tim Raker of Raker’s Acres. “Not once did he ever attempt to avert a business responsibility. It was always a pleasure to work with a person whose end game was to make sure the customer was satisfied. He intimately understood business and customer relationships and the endearing friendships that resulted from living his everyday life philosophy; he will surely be missed, but never forgotten.”

George Dean of Wadsworth Controls recalls that “Al was just one of those people that you liked immediately when you met him. We worked on a lot of projects together and it made me realize he was a man of integrity and intelligence ... the kind of person you enjoy doing business with. The company and manufacturing plant Al put together over the years is astounding. He was a true entrepreneur in every sense of the word.”

Retired Executive Vice President Mike Engdall of Allied Tube & Conduit says Al was “a prince of a man who made my life better just knowing he was my friend. Both as a customer and a dear friend he always exuded class and dignity. The world as we know it will be emptier without Al. He made people smile; he is a great loss to those who were fortunate enough to know him on a personal level.”

Those who made their living competing with Al and Rough Brothers are no less forthcoming. “I first knew Al as a good competitor, then as a good golfer, then as a good friend,” said Jim Stuppy of Stuppy Greenhouses. “But most importantly I knew him as a good man. We will all miss him, but we are all better off for having known Al.”

Another competitor, Steve Scantland of nearby Ludy Greenhouses, said, “We were friendly competitors. We worked together, borrowing or trading materials back and forth when either of us needed something that couldn’t wait for delivery. We loved to beat the other on a project bid, but were glad the business stayed with one of us.”

For Al there was always life outside the greenhouse industry: family, sports, and in a big way, charitable work.

“Many know Al Reilly for his accomplishments in the greenhouse industry,” said Jennifer Goodin, executive director of Cincinnati’s Ronald McDonald House Charities, “but another of his great passions was for helping others. Al was a long-time supporter of our charity ... He didn’t give for the recognition, he gave because of his compassion for others and his desire to help those less fortunate. He was a true gentleman and a class act, always quick with a warm and genuine smile ... It was an honor to know and work with Al, and we will miss his friendship and guidance.”

Albert “Al” Reilly was born February 19, 1943 in Scarsdale, New York. He graduated from Middlebury College with a Bachelor’s of Arts in economics and a Master’s in English literature. He became head football coach at Lyndon Institute in Lyndonville, Vermont, in 1963, where he was named Vermont High School Coach of the Year.

In 1971, Al was named head coach at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois—at the time making him the youngest NCAA head coach in the country. His 1976 team was undefeated, winning the Midwest Conference championship and was ranked in the Top 10 in the Division III poll. He’s a 2013 Knox-Lombard Athletic Hall of Fame inductee.

In 1977, Al left coaching to purchase Rough Brothers, Inc., in Cincinnati, Ohio. Under Al's guidance, Rough Brothers became the leader in the commercial and conservatory market segments. A selection of projects includes:

- U.S. Botanic Gardens—Washington, D.C.
- Enid Haupt Conservatory at the New York Botanic Garden
- Garfield Park Conservatory—Chicago, Illinois
- Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square—Wilmington, Delaware
- Huntington Gardens—Los Angeles, California
- The Learning Center, Cincinnati Zoo—Cincinnati, Ohio
- Krohn Conservatory—Cincinnati, Ohio
- National Zoo—Washington, D.C.

Rough Brothers has built commercial structures for greenhouse operators for three quarters of a century. Under Al's leadership, Rough Brothers was named the Greater Cincinnati Small Business of the Year by the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce in 1995 and an "Up and Comer" in the Greater Cincinnati Top 100 Companies.

Al is a past president of the National Greenhouse Manufacturers Association and the World Presidents Association. He was active in the American Academy of Florists and the Ohio Florists Association. He served on the Board of Advisors of the University of Cincinnati's Goehring Center and Xavier University's (Cincinnati) Williams Business School.

He was active in charitable work, particularly Cincinnati's Ronald McDonald House Charities. As a certified private and commercial pilot, Al made many angel flights, transporting families to specialized hospitals outside of the Cincinnati area. **GT**