

# Saying Goodbye To Joe Nucci



BY JIM PREVORA

If it is possible to shake an entire industry and send its members into a state of trembled mourning, the passing of Joe Nucci will certainly be remembered as a total earthquake with months and perhaps years of aftershocks in its wake.

Taken from this earth at an age far too young and at a stage in his life where he was beginning to step into the spotlight of industry leadership, Joe Nucci epitomized everything that the industry looked for in its future.

Ironically, it was in the last issue of PRODUCE BUSINESS that we honored leaders under the age of 40, and, since Joe Nucci, president and CEO of Mann Packing, was already 40, he wanted his younger sisters who worked beside him — Lorri Koster and Gina Nucci — to be nominated. (Another sister, Dee Dee Reyna, no longer works for Mann.) He was like that — always looking out for others.

In the same giving fashion, Joe wanted to give his wife and two boys the vacation of a lifetime when he arranged to meet with me and my family in Orlando before they were to set off on a Caribbean cruise.

On July 6th my wife Debbie, my sons, William, age 3, and Matthew, age 2, went to meet the Nuccis at the Happiest Place on Earth. Joe, his wife, also named Debbie, his sons, Matthew, age 11, and Michael, nicknamed Milo, age 5, flew into Orlando from Salinas, and my family drove up from Boca Raton. We met in the lobby of the Animal Kingdom Lodge in Walt Disney World.

We registered and secured rooms next to each other and then went straight to eat dinner. We ate at Jiko, which is Swahili for “A Cooking Place” and has an African theme. Joe said he had never had African food and we had a grand time. I ordered loads of appetizers including sampler platters with different African breads and dips. Even the boys were troopers, trying everything.

We had so much fun, swapping stories and entertaining each other’s children — the kind of fun good friends who live far from each other relish when they can reconnect.

After dinner we took the kids out to a 24-hour playground at the resort. We watched the kids chase each other and play “monster tag,” in which one of the children is the “monster” until he catches and tags another one. Joe and Debbie had the longer trip, so we sent them upstairs to relax and start unpacking while my wife and I kept an eye on the children.

They were having such a ball on the playground but we had a big day scheduled for tomorrow at the theme parks, so we pulled them off the playground and headed upstairs.

The specific appeal of this hotel is that if you book a Savannah view room, which we did, you can look out the windows or sit on your balcony and enjoy the animals. So we all went out on the Nuccis’ balcony and watched the giraffes feed. What a treat! Joe and I looked out on the wild animals and looked at our wives pointing out animals to the children. Joe’s son Matthew explained details to the little guys as Joe and I looked at each other with the pride husbands and fathers feel when they know they did something great for their families.

It was after midnight when we said our goodnights. We went next door, brushed our teeth and, although the kids were excited about the prospects of seeing Mickey Mouse the next day, all finally crashed and slept the sleep of the blessed.

It was about 1:30 am when the world changed...

I will spare you the details of what happened that night because it is too difficult to write and so filled with sadness that the memory of the events should be commanded to fade quickly, as if the mythological drug nependthe could be summoned to erase the sorrow.

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By the next evening, Joe’s body and his family were being flown back to Salinas.

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After we said our goodbye and the Nucci family headed back to California, my wife and I had to make a decision. Our boys, too young to understand and not quite certain why they hadn’t seen Mickey Mouse yet, were wonderful during the entire ordeal, but they had been made a promise.

And, frankly, at 2 and 3, how much do I really want them to understand? When we gave William an explanation about death and heaven and why everyone was sad, he said, “Well, if Joe is in heaven, then Matthew and Michael and their Mommy should come see Mickey Mouse with us and then they will be happy!” There are advantages to being 3 years old.

So, with there being nothing else we could do for our friends, I decided to take the children to Disney World. And although their mother and I could have done without the “Have a magical day” stuff, I am convinced that I was honoring Joe more by taking them than by keeping them home.

Joe was well known in the industry. He had been involved in so many boards and organizations, and he was to be the chair-



man of the Produce Marketing Association in 2006. He led an innovative company and was often called the father of broccoli coleslaw, a breakthrough that let Mann transform a waste product from making broccoli florets into a profitable item.

Though we lived on opposite coasts, Joe and I grew up together in the business, and I had the great pleasure to be part of a number of his projects. I remember when Mann first introduced broccoli coleslaw. Joe wanted to introduce it at FMI, but Mann didn't have a booth. FMI wouldn't let us split our booth, but there was nothing to stop PRODUCE BUSINESS from giving out Mann's new broccoli coleslaw to every passerby. Lorri flew out to Chicago and we shared the booth and that was the start of a special relationship with the Nucci family.

In watching Joe over the years, I also saw him grow as a man and a leader. He had many natural gifts. My wife has always called him, and not at all jokingly, "the best looking man in produce." He had a way of carrying himself that lit up a room when he entered.

Joe had such an open, generous nature that everyone couldn't help but like him. He was without conceit, he was straightforward and frank, and he contributed so much to whatever organization he was involved with because he was willing to share his honest opinions.

And he was fun. At every opportunity, Debbie and Joe closed down the house. They danced, they laughed, they lived.

Joe's job was not without its pressures. It

was an important position for a young man. But he loved his work. Yes, his first choice would have been to coach the 49ers but, beyond that, he thought he had a great job.

But it was family first for Joe. Perhaps we became friends because we both shared the many blessings and burdens a young man feels in having an extraordinary father. And if I am happy for anything in this horror, it is that he died with his family, taking them to Disney World. If he had to go, I can't think of a place Joe would have rather been.

When someone old dies, we can feel great sadness. We can mourn the loss. But life is, to some extent, a series of implicit promises between people. When an older man dies and we say he "lived a good life," to some extent what we are saying is he lived to fulfill, as best he could, all of these implicit promises.

He got his children through school and braces and driving and college and marriage and the birth of his grandchildren. He buried his parents. He went through the life cycle with his wife and their friends.

When a 40-year-old father passes, you mostly feel cheated.

We had plans. We were all supposed to go to Cancun together in two years. Debbie and Joe danced at my wedding, and we were all going to dance at Matthew's. As friends with young families, we were going to go through it all together.

Joe and I had grown up in the industry and we were going to retire in it together. Now, it is like the deal is off, someone broke the promise. You don't want to blame Joe

and you don't want to blame God, so you just stew.

And I'm just a friend. Think of his parents. His siblings. His wife. Think of Matthew. Think of Milo.

The loss to the industry is great. The intersection of people with ability and companies willing to support them is rare. But businesses must go on. Mann has a good team, and it will prosper. PMA will find new leaders. The industry will endure.

But my wife and I hold hands differently now. I may be a pundit, but I can find no great lessons here. No rules to live by. We still have to work toward tomorrow even if we are reminded that we are never promised another day.

As we were saying goodbye, I gave Joe's older son Matthew a card with all my contact numbers and e-mails and asked him, despite having uncles, friends and grandparents aplenty, to please call me if he ever needed any help in life. I didn't know what else to do.

Twenty years ago, I called Mann Packing as we were launching PRODUCE BUSINESS and I tried to convince Mr. Ramsey to buy an ad for our premier edition. Dave Stidolph had designed all these wonderful ads with cartoons, and Mann was advertising big time, introducing Broccoli Wokly and other fresh-cuts. I tried so hard. It meant so much to me. But I failed.

I remember my father, who was sitting next to me in an office we shared, heard me on the phone and said he thought I had done all I could. He said that I did everything but offer to take a railcar of broccoli in barter.

I am ashamed at how much that meant to me back then.

In the fullness of time, we got those ads and, more important, a whole group of friends with the Nuccis and the Kosters at Mann Packing.

I wasn't Joe's best friend. He had many friends back home. But God gave my family the gift of being there to help when help was needed. And He gave us all the gift of a last supper filled with love and laughter. I will try hard to be grateful.

I have one final word of gratitude as I think about Joe. Like good produce people everywhere, we were always fighting over the check. I let him win at our African feast only because I knew we would be dining together for the next few days and I would get my chance again.

It tells you more about Joe than much else I can say to let you know that I am certain Joe died happier knowing he had treated everyone than he would have had I paid that last bill.