

Jim & Heidi Kuhn: 2005 Farmers of the Year

Remembering Jim Kuhn

by Nicole Rothfleisch

The Imperial County farm community recently suffered a tremendous loss with the death of local farmer, Jim Kuhn. You may have [read newspaper articles](#) recounting [Jim's many accomplishments](#) including developing Klein Grass in the Imperial Valley, KF Dairy, Imperial Valley Cheese and Kuhn Farms which grows, sells and exports products. Jim felt very committed to the 300 employees and their families that those businesses support.

As a leader in the agriculture industry, Jim was honored with numerous awards including: Outstanding Alfalfa Producer in the Western Region by the Certified Alfalfa Seed Council (1998), CA Alfalfa Producer of the Year by the CA Alfalfa Symposium (1997), he was one of several local growers who broke the world record for sugar beet production (1997 & 1998) and he was 1st runner up for the Outstanding Young Farmer & Rancher of the year for the California Farm Bureau Federation (1994). He was one of two founders of the CA Alfalfa and Forage Association and he co-wrote a brochure titled, "Alfalfa, Queen of Forages" in order educate elected officials and other leaders on the environmental and economic benefits of alfalfa. He also spoke at various conferences like the Alfalfa Symposium. Jim assisted with getting the Imperial County Dairy Attraction Committee started and helped to set up a tour which lead to the first dairy to relocate here, Bullfrog Farms. He was ardent in his desire to see dairies come to the Imperial Valley to benefit the [forage industry](#). Jim loved teaching his kids about agriculture, perseverance and the value of hard work. Heidi jokes that sometimes young Fritz seems to know more about the farm than she does because of all that Jim taught him.

Jim was an avid wildlife photographer and was instrumental in starting the Annual Salton Sea Bird Festival which attracts bird enthusiasts from around the world to the Imperial Valley each year. He published two books based on his photography: "[Guide to the Birds of the Imperial Valley](#)" and "Baja CA: Land of Contrasts." He had been in the process of working towards getting a third book published: "Wilflowers of the Sonoran Desert." Hopefully someday this dream will be fulfilled. Additionally, Jim was the President of the Imperial County Arts Council for many years. Having the opportunity to live and farm near the Navy Base, Jim loved the

Blue Angels and was a life member of Navy League. He was also active in his church, the Sts. Peter & Paul Episcopal Church in El Centro.

I only had the opportunity to know Jim for a few years, but there are a few things I will always remember about him and that I hope I can learn to apply in my own life: his passion for his family, community and farm, his love of the Imperial Valley, his zest for life and his encouraging ways. Whenever I was around Jim he always went out of his way to give me a few encouraging words. His words went a long way, especially for someone just starting off in an industry such as this. The last time I saw Jim, in fact, he was encouraging people. I was at a meeting at the Stockman's Club in Brawley, just days before Jim was killed, in a room filled with anxious sugar beet growers discussing the fate of their industry regarding the pending sale of Holly Sugar. After everyone in the meeting had the opportunity to ask questions and vent frustrations and concerns, Jim Kuhn stood up to lead the group in giving an appreciative round of applause to the farmers who had spent many hours working to negotiate the best deal possible for their fellow beet growers.

The unexpected death of a young leader such as Jim should teach us all many lessons. Of course, the fact that Jim was not wearing his seatbelt that morning as he was driving around his farm should be a reminder to many of you farmers out there that I know do the same thing every day. Wear your seatbelts – it is worth it! Quit cussing that obnoxious dinger that sounds relentlessly until you do buckle up – it could save your life. There are, however, many more valuable lessons to be gained by this tragedy, lessons that Jim taught us. First and foremost, we never know if we will live to see tomorrow, so we all need to be prepared to meet our Maker. Second, live each and every day to its fullest and most passionate, as if it were your last day on earth. Reach out to people and create, nurture and celebrate relationships. Challenge yourself and don't live up to others' expectations, only to your own. Be thankful for and celebrate God's gift of nature. Be passionate about learning. Don't be afraid of hard work. Don't sweat the small stuff – none of it really matters in the long run anyway.

Farm Bureau has decided to memorialize Jim with an annual Jim Kuhn Memorial "Farmer of the Year Award" by encouraging other farmers to follow in his footsteps by being leaders in the agriculture community.

I will close with a quote from Heidi, “If one farmer's life could be saved by learning to buckle up as a result of this tragedy that would be wonderful. But if thousands of people's lives were enriched or emboldened by Jim's example or by his relationship with them, then such a tragedy really starts to take on a different light.”