

Reflections on Farwest

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world's social and economic norms with shelter-in-place orders and social distancing.

Unfortunately, it has also turned the business of large events upside down — including the Farwest Show. That's why you're holding a Farwest Edition of *Digger* without a show to attend this year.

Oregon growers define the show

The loss of the trade show certainly has its consequences to the nursery community. The sudden change brought on by the elegant and deadly COVID-19 pathogen has created a hole in the nursery family that is not easily filled.

However, it is you — as member, exhibitor, or even visitor from around the globe — that defines the show. And that's a perspective shared by four executive directors of OAN, each with their own story to tell.

Clayton Hannon (1988–1999)

The patron saint of OAN executive directors, Clayton Hannon is a native Oregonian who was forged in the Klamath Basin. He became the youngest sports editor of a daily paper in the country, went on to serve as executive director of the Portland Rose Festival, and then OAN.

In 11 years on the job, Clayton left a remarkable legacy. Our industry's Distinguished Service Award was named for him, and for good reason. His legend continues to this day.

Clayton served as a catalyst when the Farwest Show made a quantum leap in sophistication and reach. He said the experience was inspiring — he witnessed how far reaching the event was becoming to not only our Oregon folks, but nationally as well.

Farwest had humble beginnings in the basement conference center of Memorial Coliseum, which at the time was “the place” for big events. In 1991, it became one of the first to change venues to the Oregon Convention Center (OCC).

Hannon presided over tremendous growth to all who wanted to be part of “the” green industry trade show. A few

years later, more space was made available when the OCC expanded its exhibit and conference capacity. Soon, the show set new exhibitor and attendee records.

In the years following his retirement in 1999, Clayton walked the show floor as a spectator, with none of the pressure, but increased pride.

John Aguirre (1999–2010)

It's hard to follow a legend in Clayton Hannon. John Aguirre had his bona fides: he was a former congressional staffer on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry and later, the House Committee on Agriculture. He then served a stint at the National Food Processors Association and became vice president of the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association.

Aguirre brought the OAN to the national stage on pest and disease issues. He oversaw impactful programming at Farwest and presided over its tremendous growth.

To Aguirre the overwhelming sentiment is people come first, which explains much about the enduring success of the Farwest Show. Nursery people want to network, they want to connect, and they want to see the quality of the person standing behind the business. That is why it is so important.

Trust is built when people can talk face-to-face and there is an understanding of shared values. Volunteers were the key to the Farwest Show. Aguirre has never seen anything like it in his 34-year career. He believes to this day that the Farwest Show is a monument to an incredible community of people.

Allan Niemi (2010)

History is full of interesting transitions. Many people think Alexander Hamilton served as president — he did not. Many do not know that Chester Arthur had to step in after President James Garfield passed away. Arthur served as the 21st U.S. president.

Niemi served as the interim executive director of OAN and pulled double duty — he was (and still is) OAN's director of events as well. A homegrown Northwesterner and graduate of Lewis and Clark College, Niemi cut his teeth with Oregon golf legend Peter Jacobsen and his production company. Big events? No problem.

To Niemi, he remembers stepping up to



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

the position eager for the opportunity. He was burdened with California, Washington and Oregon being called out as dirty states by the USDA and its ill-fated and disastrous “pre-notification requirement.”

Niemi is much more than footnote in the history of OAN, and he is still working to make Farwest the “family reunion” of the nursery and greenhouse calendar.

Me (2010–present)

Growing up in Eugene, graduating from the University of Oregon, spending time in the meat grinder of politics with U.S. Senator Bob Packwood and as chief of staff to the Metro Regional Government, my first exposure to Farwest was through Rod Park, who was serving on the Metro Council.

He brought me to OCC to witness what he did for a living. I was astounded at the show, its feel and grounded nature of business and community. When I became your government relations director for five years, that appreciation of family, collaboration, fierce loyalty and hard work only grew. I was eager to take on the role of executive director when it was offered.

We have seen the very nature of trade shows change under the online superhighway of commerce. There are many ways to sell and buy plants. I foresaw a great shake-out of trade shows, but I wanted Farwest to be one of the essential places to gather.

Farwest remains a tribute to Oregon, the epicenter of quality producers. It's where you go to meet visionaries, learn and expand your nursery education. Join us in 2021 and continue the great legacy with caretakers such as Hannon, Aguirre and Niemi.

I'll see you next year! ©