

A PATH TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

Before his untimely death, Steve Zahn brought a biodegradable future to Dallas

by DAVE BROOKS



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It was quite an ambitious plan for the Dallas Convention Center. Steve Zahn, general manager there for Centerplate, was working with facility GM Frank Poe to switch the building to 100 percent biodegradable, disposable food service items, and dramatically reduce the carbon footprint of the 2-million-sq.-ft. venue.

The plan is still set to go into effect this January but, sadly, Zahn won't be there to implement his grand vision. On Nov. 5, he passed away from a sudden illness. He was 60 years old.

His unexpected death surprised many, including the staff at Venues Today who had planned to interview him regarding his sustainability initiative. Zahn had overwhelmingly won the vote for the 2009 Hall of Headlines Award for Concessions.

“He was a true giant in the food industry and one of the major influences that has led to our green standards for food operations. He will be missed by all the staff at the Dallas Convention Center,” said Poe in a statement.

At the heart of Zahn's initiative was a quest to switch all plates, cutlery, napkins and containers from plastic-based materials to biodegradable. In the past two years the biodegradable dis-

posables industry has exploded, with new cutlery made from plant starch or clamshell containers made from sugarcane. These items break down much quicker in landfills than plastic, and in many cases, can be quickly converted into fertilizer using composting.

“There's a lot of product on the market, but the challenge was finding a manufacturer who could produce the volume needed for our organization,” said Laurence Rua, VP for Centerplate and Zahn's supervisor. “We were working very closely with the corporate purchasing department. While there are a lot of products starting to roll out, we still needed to conduct extensive research to ensure the materials would work.”

Plus there were other factors to consider — what type of policies do you need to separate food waste, biodegradable materials and recyclables on the convention floor and in the kitchen? How much separating can you expect patrons to do before the process becomes overly arduous? And what do you do with all this biodegradable material once it's been collected and sorted?

“A large part of the challenge was trying to determine what city resources were available to assist in this process,” Rua said.

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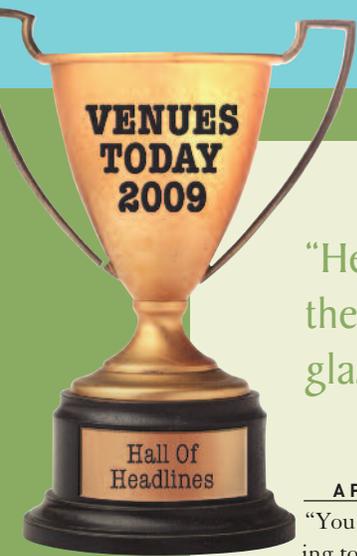
Above: Steve Zahn

We will remember
Steve Zahn's

Passion



Centerplate



CONCESSIONS

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“You have to get creative and find partners who are willing to work with you.”

That was just the type of challenge that Zahn enjoyed, explained head chef David Skorka.

“Steve (Zahn) was very calculating and could tell you how much money he spent to the penny for any event,” Skorka recalled. “He had a real dry sense of humor, but it worked for him. He was one of those guys that anyone could talk to.”



Steve Zahn (right) gives thumbs up. He's joined by Chef David Skorko (left) and Laurence Rua.

Skorka recalls that Zahn had lots of personal interests, although he always seemed most passionate about food. Skorka said the only time Zahn would get mad at him was when he walked into the kitchen and discovered there weren't any oatmeal cookies for him to slip into his briefcase. He also loved chocolate.

“He would always say the bigger the piece of chocolate cake, the smaller the fork because that way he could savor each bite,” Skorka explained. “Wash it down with a glass of merlot and he was in heaven.”

Rua said Zahn came to the Dallas Convention Center after a long run at the Embassy Suites in Dallas. Before that he worked as the head of catering for the Houston Astrodome.

“He told me he wanted to get back into the industry because he missed the challenges that came from working big events,” said Rua, who hired him. “He really got an adrenaline rush from that.”

Zahn also enjoyed spending time with his wife Kathy and his four adult children and six grandchildren. When he wasn't at home with his children, he enjoyed golf. One day while he was

practicing on the driving range, Zahn had an accident and broke his rib. Expecting to make a full recovery, Zahn visited the doctor and was shocked to learn that an MRI revealed something much worse — Zahn had stage four lung cancer. He was immediately put into emergency surgery, but died from complications from the procedure.

The news devastated the staff at the Dallas Convention Center, and surprised many of his peers. Despite the tragic loss, Zahn's sustainability efforts live on and his contributions have

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paved the way for bigger initiatives at Centerplate, said Des Hague, the company's new CEO.

“Steve's contributions transcended Dallas and what we do in the convention center business,” Hague said. “He was a true leader who hoped to provide better environmental awareness for all facilities in the Centerplate family.”

Hague said that Centerplate operations at the Vancouver (British Columbia) Convention Center and San Diego Convention Center were closely watching the Dallas initiative with their own plans to implement similar initiatives.

“It's a lasting legacy that he leaves behind, and it transcends his efforts in the biodegradable space,” Hague said. “He was an ambassador to global health with the traits to inspire all leaders, which manifested in the way he cared for his crew and the way he supported Frank (Poe) and his team to crown off their biodegradable initiative and become a thought leader for the business.”

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