

# Nelson community remembers Paul Saunders - historian, farmer, faith-filled husband and father

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Paul Saunders, pictured here in 2018, stands in the section of the orchard that grows the cherry trees.  
Lee Luther Jr., For the Nelson County Times

**P**aul Saunders, the patriarch of the Saunders family orchard business, is remembered by community members as generous, honest, faith-filled and family-oriented.

Saunders died March 11 at age 89. Born in 1933, he lived most of his life at his family home in Nelson County. He worked as a land surveyor before turning his attention to his passion: his nursery and orchards, according to his obituary. Saunders Brothers Inc. now grows and ships plants throughout the mid-Atlantic region and is one of the more well-known businesses in Nelson County.

“Daddy was a lifelong member of the community. He just loved Nelson County,” Saunders’ son Jim said.

“He taught us to love God, and that was the first thing he taught us. And the second thing he taught us was to love your family, and he wanted to be known as a man of integrity and honesty. He tried to instill those values into our family and our staff.”

Jim Saunders described his father as someone who loved people and getting to know their stories.

“He just really enjoyed being around people and enjoyed getting to know people,” he said.

Keith Phillips, owner of Phillips Equipment, said he’s been selling tractors to Paul Saunders since the 1970s.

“We took care of each other,” Phillips said.

He said Saunders was an energetic, self-made man.

“He took the bull by the horns and went on with it. He had the drive and the ambition to better himself and therefore better his family,” he said.

“He was just an upstanding and outstanding individual,” Phillips added.

He described Saunders as having Christian values that he put into practice. Phillips described a time when Saunders invited him to pray with him for Phillips’ son in the military.

“That’s the type of person he was,” Phillips said.

“He loved veterans. He wanted people to appreciate anybody that was a veteran,” Jim Saunders said.

He added his father would give veterans a coupon for a free scoop of ice cream at the Saunders Brothers Saturday farmers markets.

Jim Saunders said his father would then ask the veterans where they were stationed and what branch of the military they fought for: “He wanted to know about people.”

Paul Westervelt is the Annual and Perennial Production Manager, Head Grower and Director of New Plant Research and Development at Saunders Brothers and has worked for the company for 17 years.

Westervelt said one of the reasons he’s worked at Saunders Brothers for so long is Paul Saunders and his wife Tatum’s friendliness and kindness.

Westervelt said Saunders’ love for boxwood helped make Saunders Brothers nationally known for specializing in the shrubs.

“They’re not just little green meatballs. And it’s his passion for the genus that showed people there’s tall and skinny and short and fat and dwarf and variegated and blue” he said.

Westervelt said Saunders started the National Boxwood Trials when he shipped plants which he thought had merit all over the county, asking for feedback and compiling the information for public use.

“He was passionate about everything,” Jim Saunders said.

“Whatever he was involved in he was passionate about. Whether it was his church or his business, he was committed to it.”

He added his father wanted to share his passions with others. He spoke of the book Paul Saunders authored about Nelson County history, “Heartbeats of Nelson.”

“He really enjoyed history and enjoyed putting down on paper some of these events so the next generation would have those events and have a collection of them.”

David Martin started working for the Saunders family in the 1960s. His mother and two sisters worked for the company and his father and uncle worked for Saunders Brothers for 50 years. He said he remembers Paul Saunders’ father Sam’s first greenhouse.

Martin described Saunders as honest and hardworking and said he always treated people with respect. He said Saunders always called him “David Wayne,” never forgetting his first and middle name.

“He was the kind of man that makes people want to say meaningful things,” Westervelt said of Saunders.

“Paul Saunders impacted hundreds of people through this company. He was very humble but he was also very filled with joy to be able to have such a positive impact on so many people’s lives. He did a lot of great things for my family and others.”