

Joe Pires Snr 1931–1993

The world view of Joe Pires Snr can be judged from the name he gave the company he formed in 1966—Caribbean Chemicals.

It was only a two-person company at that point, recalls his son Joe Jr—the other person was Pires' wife Anjelica (known as Ann). But they “worked and worked.” Joe Jr remembers board meetings even being held at their dining table at home.

All that work paid off. Joe Pires Snr was always a Caribbean man, and his vision of half a century ago eventually became reality.

His father, who had come to Guyana from Madeira, owned pineapple farms; that was where young Joe first became fascinated with agriculture. His father died when Joe was 12, and life must have been hard after that, but he was a bright boy, and at only 16, in 1948, he got a British Government scholarship to study in Canada, acquiring a master's degree in plant pathology. On his return to Guyana he had to work for the government for a while, and then went into the private sector, as a sales agronomist for T Geddes Grant.

He also became politically active, helping to form a party in opposition to Forbes Burnham. But at one political meeting he was shot at, and his family's house was nearly burned down—by then he had married Ann and they had a daughter and two sons. The youngest, Joe Jr, was born here after Pires asked to be transferred to Trinidad, for the safety of his family.

He changed jobs too, working for the agricultural division of Esso, and travelling throughout the region. Wherever he went he was always out in the fields, recalls Joe Jr - visiting farms and sugar estates, giving farmers' advice.

Then, when the Trinidad and Tobago government nationalised oil companies, Esso sold its other assets and Pires was offered the chance to form his own company. Thus in December 1966 Caribbean Chemicals and Agencies Ltd., came into being.

Pires didn't just sell fertilisers and pesticides. He visited other countries—Brazil, India, China—looking for plants and products that would suit the Caribbean. He introduced hybrid varieties and new crops that could be grown here—such as broccoli, radishes, and coloured sweet peppers, and a variety of pawpaw that thrives in the region. He found ways to increase the yield of a tomato plant from six to ten pounds – to today, 30-35 pounds.

He also had not only a radio programme but a weekly segment on the news programme, Panorama, on Trinidad and Tobago Television, also offering tips for farmers and small-scale gardeners—so his gravelly voice was recognised everywhere. “His love was always educating,” Joe Jr explains. Hence he also hired students from the University of the West Indies' agriculture programme as interns every year to gain practical experience, and sponsored a scholarship there.

His own children were part of this drive; they weren't really given a choice, Joe Jr says. As teenagers they got two weeks of vacation mid-year, and the rest was spent working for Caribbean Chemicals. They didn't get an easy ride: “He was a tough man...as a son in the family business you had to do better than everyone else.”

Joe is grateful for that. “I get my work ethic from him, and it's completely different from my peers'.” And his father would also give praise where it was due for special accomplishments. Victor is based in Guyana as the managing director where he takes after Joe Snr in enjoying working with farmers, and Joe Jr is the managing director at the Trinidad base in Aranguez.

Somehow Joe Pires Snr also found time for public service, channelling the desire for improving people's lives that had motivated his political activity in Guyana. As well as sitting on many private boards, he was the chair of State boards under both PNM and NAR governments. He chaired the Central Market Corporation and served on the boards of the Development and Environmental Works Programme (DEWD), the National Productivity Council, the Caribbean Food Corporation, the Caribbean Agriculture Trading Company, and the National Planning Commission. He was half of a two-man team that worked on an early plan to restructure Caroni (1975) Ltd. He was the only Trinidadian member of the World Food Congress panel, which sat during the 1980s and 1990s.

Joe Snr played as hard as he worked: he was an avid fisherman and owned racehorses with friends. He loved watching American football—Joe Jr remembers watching a game with him, making a comment and addressing it to “Mr Pires”—sometimes it was hard to separate his boss from his father.

He remembers, too, his father saying it took fifty years to create wealth. Now, fifty years after he founded it, Caribbean Chemicals has bases in Guyana, Suriname and Jamaica. They export to 30 different countries throughout the region, including French-, Dutch-, and Spanish-speaking countries.

Sadly, Joe Pires Snr never lived to see the full realisation of his dream, dying tragically young of a heart attack at 62, in 1993. Joe Jr laughs at the idea that his father would ever have retired: “He was a workaholic through and through. He would still have been coming to work every day at 7 am, like my mum.

“He would have been the boss,” he adds. “He was loving and caring—but he was the boss.”

Joe Jr’s testimony is reinforced by Michael Toney, now chairman of Caribbean Chemicals Ltd, and for many years Joe Snr’s accountant and friend. He first knew Joe Pires long before they actually met, as many people did—from the radio. Toney lived in Sangre Grande, and as he got ready to go to school in Port of Spain, Pires’ morning radio programme was on the air. Toney’s father was a schoolteacher, but owned a plot of land next to their home where he grew vegetables, and would listen to Pires’ tips on what to grow, how to grow it, and how to deal with pests.

Toney first met Pires after returning from his studies; they were members of the Port of Spain Central Rotary Club, which Pires had started with friends. He asked Toney to be Caribbean Chemicals’ auditor, and the two men became close: “We spent many hours playing pool in their house, into the small hours.”

Toney describes Pires as: “a very fair person. He’d listen to all sides of a proposition before making up his mind. He was affable. He just grew on you.”

At work, Toney recalls Pires as one of the first people he met who took power naps: “You’d come into the office and his secretary would tell you: ‘He’s in there taking a nap’—he’d sleep for 20 minutes and then be fit as a fiddle. I’ve never seen a guy so full of life. He was involved in a lot of activities. He led a really full life.”

He later joined the business full-time because Joe Jr also valued Toney’s experience and advice after his own father died. Mike Toney later joined the board along with Audley Walker (a past president of the Chamber) because Joe Jr also valued their experience. Toney remembers that many years ago, when he came to do the accounts at Caribbean Chemicals’ offices, he would see Joe Jr and his elder brother Victor working at desks in an office just outside their father’s: “He used to crack the whip at them—and you can see the results today.”

It is therefore with great honour that the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce – which he served as President for two terms - inducts Mr. Joe Pires Snr Ferreira into its Business Hall of Fame.