

# 'More than flowers, a lifestyle' motto rings true for J.R. Koontz

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Sunday at 4:15 a.m., J.R. Koontz of J.R. Koontz Flowers woke to start his morning. He fed the dog and cats, worked out at the YMCA and made coffee at home before heading to work to put on a pot of coffee for his employees.

Sunday was also his birthday. "I have to work, it's right before Valentine's Day," Koontz said. "Two years I didn't and two years I was in the hospital."

That's birthday after birthday spent crafting beautiful bouquets for the birthdays of others, weddings, funerals and other occasions.

After graduating from Wichita State with an art degree, where he was also a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, he used the flower business to help pay for his college education.

"I did not plan to stay in this business," Koontz said. "What happened was during the late 1960s and early 1970s I was being recognized for my design ability in the floral industry. Instead of going into art education, I chose to stay within the floral industry."

J.R. Koontz Flowers was founded in 1974.

## Flowers for the Beggs'

Not only has Koontz become acquainted with numerous families over the years, but has arranged flowers for four different WSU presidents including Donald Beggs.

"I have served many presidents at the university through the years and none

that have worked as a team the way they do," he said. "It was always the president and his wife not the president and the first lady. They have brought such a huge change on that campus."

Koontz recalled working in the basement of the president's home, helping decorate for Christmas.

"It didn't have but a tiny little dining room and a tiny little living room," Koontz said. "Now it is as beautiful of a home in Wichita that there is. It's very, very special to be invited there."

He also remembers one dinner for 14 people auctioned off for \$7,000.

Koontz decorated the tablescape.

"I am behind the scenes a lot at Wichita State," he said.

## Love in a flower shop

Not only has Koontz spent a large portion of his life in the flower shop, but he found love there, too.

His wife April came to work for him as an apprentice.

"Her and one of her girl friends I employed," he said. "Her friend became ill and had to have some emergency surgery. April was left alone. I was going to lose another designer, I had already lost one, so I said...well, I'll help you. I offered her a place to stay in my home and from that our relationship developed. I thought I was cutting back on payroll and instead it was the most expensive thing I ever did in my entire life."

## Phases of life and love

For Koontz, all phases of life include the formation and fostering of relationships. After all, he considers his business a form of

ministry.

"Right now, you're having a good time and enjoying yourself and trying to find vocations. Then after a while you get focused in on...how can I make as much money as I possibly can because I've gotta have this car or I've gotta have that. Then you go through another phase... what do you mean I'm spending \$50 for this baby's shoes?"

"There are so many phases that you walk through. After you go through the wow events, you reevaluate again and find that what you've really done is build relationships and you can affect peoples' lives. With that form of talent—whether it's a single rose or an entire bouquet—you are causing someone to react in a positive way. In a way, it's kind of like a ministry for me because you do affect peoples' emotions and relationships in a positive way and we try. And it has nothing to do with the amounts of money people spend with you.

"I have told young people interested in getting into this business: One, are you sure you want to? Two, it's a real commitment if you're going to be successful at it. It means that just because everyone else has gone home it doesn't mean that you're going to go home. When you're exhausted on your feet you have to keep going because people are depending on you."

Koontz sees all phases of love, too.

"But it starts with that first corsage and that boutonniere. It's your prom. You've got your first girly girl

dress that you really wanted. Hopefully you're going with someone you kinda like. At that point in your life it's like, Oh I'm in love, I'm in love. No you're not, you don't even know this dude. But it starts with how unique those flowers were. You remember that and it makes an impression. You go to college and receive some flowers every once in a while if the boys are smart. Then all of a sudden it's time you fall in love and you think OK this is the one and you plan that wedding, whether it's in the park or justice peace or a big church wedding.

"Whatever it is, you still want it kinda unique within parameters, prices, whatever. Comfort zones. Now we've been doing it for over 40 years.

"So I've been around the block a few times. Eventually you will reflect back on what you saw and who you really became friends with or built a relationship with."

## Built to last

Over the years, Koontz has observed the relationships of many, including those of his own children.

His oldest daughter was killed in a car crash and his second daughter's marriage did not last.

Koontz joked about arguments that he'd had over the years with his wife of more than 30 years.

"When our first daughter came along it was...If you keep this up you'll never see your daughter again. Then came our other two children. She said, 'Go ahead and leave. Or better yet, I will. But you've got all three kids.' However, they've made it



Photo by Stephanie Sanchez

J.R. Koontz, the man behind the flower arrangements, was a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon while attending Wichita State.

last. Koontz recognized that relationships today develop differently than they used to.

"It's neat to see young people fall in love with friends because unfortunately for most of the young couples, it's the passion first and the looks and you hope it works," he said. "But it's the relationships that seem to hang on the most are the ones that are built on friendship first and it goes from there."

For J.R., his business truly is about more than flowers. It's a lifestyle.

With flowers coming in from all over the world and the store specializing in exotic arrangements such as Birds of Paradise or orchids from Singapore, J.R.'s favorite flower is the gardenia.

"They're simple, elegant and fragrant," he said. "But there isn't a flower that I don't like."