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Jacobs Engineering founder dies

Entrepreneur celebrated for ethical values

By Gary Scott , Staff Writer

PASADENA -- Joseph J. Jacobs, the founder and chairman of Jacobs Engineering Group Inc. who built the Pasadena company from a one-man operation into a global firm with thousands of employees, died Saturday in Pasadena. He was 88.

Jacobs, who was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., is survived by his wife, Violet, three daughters and two grandchildren.

"He was a gentleman whom I respected and admired for what he did in the business world but equally for what he did in the community with numerous charitable organizations," said James McNulty, chairman of Parsons Corp., a competitor and fellow Pasadena firm. "He is a real example of what a corporate citizen should be."

Jacobs founded his business in 1947 as Jacobs Engineering Co., a one-man company in which he operated both as a chemical engineering consultant and a manufacturers' representative for process equipment.

The company now has more than 35,000 employees who provide technical, professional and construction services around the globe.

Although not involved in day-to-day operations in recent years, Jacobs remained active in the company as chairman of the board of directors until his death.

Having given up routine involvement at Jacobs, he continued to champion entrepreneurship by founding two venture capital firms that invested in startup companies specializing in innovative technologies.

"Through the years, Joe was a great friend, mentor and boss," said Chief Executive Officer Noel Watson. "Joe was a giant in our industry. His quest for professionalism, coupled with his vision and ethical values, shaped our world."

Jacobs was active in a variety of foundations and advocacies. His humanitarian endeavors included establishment of the Jacobs Family Foundation to promote

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community-based economic development, aid families and youths at risk, and provide educational and other opportunities to underrepresented groups.

He was an active supporter of United Way, the Boy Scouts, The Salvation Army, the Near East Foundation and other causes.

"He was obviously a very successful business person and engineer, but also a person who as soon as he made money turned around and gave it away," said Pasadena Councilman Steve Madison. He asked that the City Council adjourn its meeting Monday in Jacobs' honor.

In addition to his charity work, Jacobs was a founder and vice chairman of the American Task Force for Lebanon he and his wife are of Lebanese heritage a member of the board of trustees of Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, where his contributions funded the Jacobs Science Center, and chairman of the board of trustees of the Polytechnic University in New York, where he earned bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees in chemical engineering.

Jacobs penned numerous columns for the Pasadena Star-News in the late 1990s under the title "The Compassionate Conservative." Jacobs coined the term in his 1995 book by the same name; George W. Bush would pick up the mantle in his 2000 run for president.

"He was a great personal friend and I will miss the guidance and wise counsel he provided me over the years," said Rep. David Dreier, R-Glendora. "I still frequently refer to his book on political philosophy for inspiration and will continue to do so in the future."

In his columns, Jacobs touted the free market as society's best salvation, warned that multiculturalism is a destructive force and, like a true engineer, referenced Newton's Third Law of Motion for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction to underscore his economic theories.

"In the sense that conservatives seek to free ordinary people from the domination of government and from the increasing dependence upon an oppressive government bureaucracy, then we could be classified as the true liberals of the late 20th century," Jacobs wrote.

Jacobs was chairman of Polytechnic University's board of trustees from 1974 to 1984 and again from 1992 to 1994. The university also gave him an award for creative technology and an honorary doctorate of science.

In 1983, then-President Ronald Reagan presented Jacobs with the Hoover Medal, which recognizes the civic and humanitarian achievements of professional engineers.

In describing Jacobs' selection, the medal committee cited him as an "eminent engineer; distinguished builder of worldwide enterprises in chemical engineering; a vital humanitarian force devoted to the support of education in engineering and the sciences for the welfare of society both nationally and internationally; and a dedicated contributor to improving an understanding of the problems of the elderly."

Jacobs wrote an autobiography, "The Anatomy of an Entrepreneur: Family, Culture, and Ethics," and also wrote "The Compassionate Conservative: Assuming Responsibility and Respecting Human Dignity."

Wire services contributed to this story. Gary Scott can be reached at (626) 578-6300, Ext. 4458, or by e-mail at gary.scott@sgvn.com.

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