



Farmer Joe Aiello honored with Leadership Excellence Award

Aiellos own Uesugi Farms, one of the largest ag operations in the county

By Marty Cheek

Think of the farming business as a poker game played against Mother Nature. Joe Aiello and his wife Katie found out what a painful gamble agriculture can be in August 1976 on a 100-acre farm northeast of Morgan Hill. The couple had placed a bet by securing a tomato contract. The summertime field was coming to its peak that Bicentennial year and Aiello figured he was less than a week away from harvest.

Then disaster struck. Mother Nature showed her poker hand with a torrential storm. An inch and a half of rain fell Aug. 20 on the South Valley. When the sun came out, the vines got hot, creating the perfect conditions for fungus to rot Aiello's entire tomato crop. The couple lost much of their investment on the venture.

Despite the set back, the Aiellos persevered and today are the heroes of a South Valley rags to riches story. They own Uesugi Farms, one of the largest agricultural operations based in Santa Clara County, with two farm sites in Mexico as well as fields in Fillmore, San Martin, Gilroy, Hollister, Brentwood, Lodi and the Coachella Valley. Their corporation every year grows tens of thousands of tons of bell peppers, chili peppers, napa cabbage, pumpkins, sweet corn, dried beans and other crops.

When he's not running the farms, Joe Aiello stays involved as a leader of the South Valley community, providing thousands of dollars every year in scholarships for students who want to study agricultural sciences in college. He also is involved in helping young children learn how food crops are produced through various school campus gardens he has sponsored and also through a "pumpkin lab" at Uesugi's annual Pumpkin Patch attraction in October. He has also served on the board of the Santa Clara County Farm Bureau and was heavily involved in Morgan Hill Pony Baseball, helping to raise money for the local league through fundraising dinners. Aiello now serves on the board of the Western Growers Association, working with both state and federal government agencies in supporting the agricultural industry.

For his agricultural leadership and dedication to the quality of life in the region, Leadership Morgan Hill on Jan. 25 announced at an alumni event at Guglielmo Winery that Aiello was the honoree of the prestigious 2016 Leadership Excellence Award. He will be recognized for his vision and leadership at an evening outdoor celebration/fundraiser at Guglielmo Winery on July 16.

At the announcement party, Aiello expressed his concerns to the audience



Photo by Marty Cheek

Joe Aiello and his wife Katie at Guglielmo Winery after Leadership Morgan Hill board members announced Joe was this year's LEAD winner.

about receiving the LEAD honor.

"I have to say I'm really struggling with this honor," he said. "I'm humbled, and I'm nervous, yet I feel a responsibility to make this event a success. I'm sitting at (my friend) Mike Cox's dinner table last weekend, drinking a lot

who never grew up — like Peter Pan. He was always doing fun things."

After graduating from Cal Poly in 1971, Aiello and four of his friends traveled to Europe, bought a van and spent eight months exploring the world across the Atlantic, including North Africa, Sicily and England. Katie waited patiently for him, not realizing he would be gone for so long.

"When he came back, he got right to work. First he was cutting wood because he didn't really have a job," she said. "When he came home, we moved in together and that was that. We've been together ever since."

Katie recalled the struggles of those early days as a married couple. Aiello had dreamed of being a farmer ever since he was a boy of 13 and has spent a summer in 1961 driving a water truck in a field — and making a grand total of \$50 for his sweat and labor. The Aiello's first farm was 16 acres on Laurel Road in Morgan Hill. His father had bought the property several years before on speculation as a real estate investment. Old prune trees grew on the small property. Aiello cut them down and burned the wood and planted sweet corn. The year was 1972.

"Joe used my Volkswagen convertible as his first farm truck," Katie said. "He had his shovels and hoes hanging out of the back of the torn top."

The Aiellos rented a house on Malaguerra Avenue. Katie worked at a job in Palo Alto for a couple of years because they didn't have enough income coming in from the farm to support themselves. "We packed zucchini squash on our driveway on Malaguerra and then I sold corn on the road on the weekends," she said. "So it was tough but it was fun. We always had fun."

Other farmers in Morgan Hill helped the struggling young couple, including George Chiala who purchased Aiello's crops on contract. Then the August 1976 tomato disaster

happened. A lesser man might have quit. Aiello refused to give up on his dream of a career in the ag business. He got a job as a foreman for the Newhall Land & Farming Company managing 7,000 acres of land from 1977 to 1979. Then his friend George Uesugi, a Morgan Hill local grower with a small but successful farm, made him a deal he couldn't refuse. Uesugi financed Aiello and Joe's business partner Dennis Humphrey for a year and sold them his farming business. Aiello, Katie and their two sons lived in the small house on the property for 10 years as the young farmer built his business.

"George helped us with the financing to buy the seed and the fertilizer and gave me and Dennis money to live on," Aiello said. "That's one of the reasons the business still has the Uesugi name — in honor of him."

The couple's son Pete followed in his dad's footsteps and now works as the general manager of Uesugi Farms. Last year, he served as the president of the county's farm bureau. Son Michael was a man "who loved life" and was always getting himself into some adventure such as championship motocross or skiing. At age 28, he died in a small airplane accident in Los Banos in 2007.

"When we lost Michael, we decided to do something in memory of him. Something positive," Aiello said.

The family started a college scholarship program to remember Michael. With the help of farmer friends, the Aiellos have worked over the years to raise money to create a fund where the interest produces enough money to give scholarships to young people who intend to go into farming. The money is raised at a special dinner held annually the last Saturday in September at the Pumpkin Patch site south of Morgan Hill on Monterey Road. The first scholarships were about \$1,500. Now \$20,000 scholarships are given to an individual each year. Aiello wants to get the funds to an amount where he can present a four-year scholarship to future farmers.

Karl Bjarke, chair of the Leadership Morgan Hill organization in 2016, said he is delighted with Aiello's selection for this year's LEAD honor. "Joe's leadership in the farming community and, indeed, in all of the community perfectly mirrors the values of the Leadership organization," he said.

Katie said she's happy for her husband's recognition from Leadership Morgan Hill. From their struggles of the early days where they faced long hours of back-breaking work and crop ruin, to running a successful agricultural corporation with sites throughout California and Mexico, Aiello has proven himself a leader and innovator in producing food for America's tables.

"He started a lot of new things in farming here. He was one of the first guys to use drip irrigation," she said. "He's always been a hard worker and his fields have just been impeccable, beautiful fields."



Photo by Marty Cheek

2016 LEAD recipient Joe Aiello at his Uesugi Farms operation in Gilroy.

of wine, and he goes, 'Joe, you know this is a fundraiser.'" Aiello gave a stern look and the audience laughed. "I understand that my name hopefully is going to make a successful fundraiser."

Then he told the audience that his wife Katie is a big part of the honor — and of his life. "She's put up with me for 43 years," he said with a boyish grin.

Katie describes her husband as a humble man, a hard-worker who is still trying to figure out why Leadership Morgan Hill picked him. "He doesn't know quite what to think about this," she said with a laugh.

The couple met in San Luis Obispo when Aiello was an agricultural science student at Cal Poly.

"I went down to see a girlfriend who was down there. He was very interesting. We were friends for a long time before we became girlfriend and boyfriend — he was just a lot of fun," she described the early days of their relationship. "He was like a little boy, kind of like a little elf or a leprechaun. He was like a boy