

Herschel Conner

Our Colleague and Friend

By Jeff Schlotter

It is with a deep sense of loss that I prepare this reflection on our friend and colleague, Herschel C. Conner, Jr., who died on May 23 from a rare form of liver cancer. Herschel was 61.

Having joined Lochner in 1976, Herschel spent his career in our St. Petersburg and then Clearwater office. He was an urban planner and philosopher by education, and at Lochner was a Senior Vice President, Project Manager, and environmental specialist.

But he was far more than that.

I first met Herschel when I interviewed for my job at Lochner, in 1986, and he became my “boss” for the next 20 years. Over that time I came to respect him as a professional of the highest intelligence and integrity. I also came to love him as a friend, mentor, role model and wise and patient counselor.

Time and time again I witnessed the respect that our clients and colleagues reserved for Herschel, and over the years I came to realize it was because he always showed his respect for them. He would always actively listen to what was being said, whether in a one-on-one conversation, in a formal client meeting, or at a public meeting. And then, having listened well, he would, in his quiet and calm way, provide responses that shed uncanny clarity on whatever was being discussed.

Herschel had boundless curiosity about the technical sciences, about history, about the social sciences, about our transportation industry and our society. He also had the ability to recall dates, facts, meetings, project details, technical procedures, and other information with remarkable accuracy. Whether directing a project or conducting internal Lochner work, he would routinely amaze me with his ability to cut through the fog and set the record straight.

At Lochner, or when working with the public, Herschel would never raise his voice, never interrupt (even at times when normally patient people would be exasperated). He never dominated a conversation and never outwardly showed any impatience or disrespect, even when dealing with the most belligerent and angry members of the public. When other colleagues’ puffery rendered them inconsequential, Herschel’s quiet integrity made a lasting impression.

And over the years that integrity has had a profound effect on me. When I started working for Herschel, while still in graduate school, I felt I knew a lot about the world. Looking back, I cringe when I recall how foolish I often behaved. But Herschel was always patient, suffering through my foolishness, my haughtiness, my insolence with just a simple, knowing smile. He understood the futility of criticism; his approach was far more effective: he simply set a consistent example. And by his example, I slowly came to realize the wisdom of his calmer, more peaceful, more humble way of maneuvering through business and life.

I miss Herschel Conner very much, and Lochner has suffered a great loss with his passing. He was a gracious, caring person, whose faith guided him throughout his life — a life that some might say was unfairly shortened by his disease. But he would never use the word “unfair”; his faith never wavered. I’m told he was serene, unafraid, and very much at peace to the very end, which didn’t surprise me. I can remember him reminding me that change is inevitable and “to everything, there is a season.”

