

## White House Florist in Bellflower Flower Market ad leads Mary Kwan to Career

By Peggi Ridgway

If you ask Mary Kwan, owner of White House Florist, to describe her impressions of the Los Angeles Flower Market, she won't hesitate to tell you that it's "beautiful" and that today's market vendors are "more friendly – and they have coffee."

It's those little things that matter, especially for small business owners trying to get by in today's tough economic climate. More importantly, they matter to a florist who has been taking such "extra steps" for her customers and friends for a long time, someone who learned the flower business pretty much on her own in a career that evolved from her response years ago to an ad at the Flower Market.

### Starting with a fresh canvas

Mary Kwan started her career at White House Florist with only minimal experience or knowledge about the operation of a retail floral shop or selecting flowers. Georgia Rowe, the now deceased previous owner, handed her the reins just before Valentine's Day in February 1983.

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Photos by JDP Photography

Rowe's husband, seeing Mary's apprehension about being the manager of the shop, patted her shoulder and said, "You're going to be OK, Mary, you're going to be OK."

Roe's employees stayed on, key people for their roles in design and flower purchases. Kwan learned operating procedures, efficiencies and marketing from mentors like them and her cousin George Woo, now retired, former owner of Fritz Young Florists in Monterey, California. Woo, who studied floral design in Japan, first introduced Mary to the business by hiring her (part-time) in his shop. The idea that she might run her own shop soon followed. She was young, eager and willing to jump into a new thing.

Kwan has operated her shop for 27 years and owned it since the late 1990s. Her loyal customers include the children and grandchildren of Georgia Rowe's original customers.



These customers along with long-term employees, suppliers and vendors, make up the White House Florist team.

"I was lucky," she says today. "We were like a family." A family that included employees with unique talents, knowledge and skills, such as Shirley Petroski's "beautiful voice and way with customers," which was "a blessing for more than 20 years; and (current employee) Fernando Salguero is very good with customers, and super designers Mee Hong Yu and Ai Ya Yu." Mary's husband, William, cheerfully helps in the shop every morning. This is a team that pitches in and decorates, changes the décor in keeping with the seasons, and does what's necessary, without question.

### One up on the recession

A core group of dedicated employees is essential for a shop that rarely has a "slow" period. White House Florist sits on a half acre of land on busy Flower Street in Bellflower, handles heavy holiday orders and orders from customers of the mortuary right next door. During summer months, ordinarily slow for retail florists, there's a steady stream of orders from next door.

The small, quaint nooks and crannies filled with greens, day lilies, potted flowering plants, quilted pillows, gift items, studio, cooler and counter, were once rooms in a house. White's Mortuary owner Mrs. White also owned the house and converted it to a floral shop to meet the demands of her mortuary customers who frequently asked where they could

buy or order flowers. The Whites were the parents of Georgia Rowe, who rented the White House Florist to Mary Kwan and eventually sold the house property to Kwan.

### A little extra for someone

Mary Kwan has her own favorites and delights among the fresh floral products at the Los Angeles Flower Market, and she also does well at selecting flowers for anniversaries, weddings and other special occasions. She's earned the trust of many for her keen eye, her ability to choose the perfect products and her team's outstanding arrangements and decor.

Once, a father and daughter came in for a casket piece for wife/mother, a lady who had loved and grown plumeria. Mary drove to their home and cut the plumeria from the mother's garden. People who saw the arrangement on the casket exclaimed, "Wow! What beautiful flowers!," and then realized the blooms were plumeria from the deceased's garden, which made them all the more special.

"When you do a little extra for someone, they remember you," says Kwan. She is often given the task of selecting all the flowers for a funeral arrangement, by customers who know her work well. On her floral order forms, they simply check the item that tells the florist it's "your choice." Others say, "Just let Mary do it."

Georgia Rowe is still remembered for her love of flowers and the momentous contribution she made to Mary Kwan's business and career. Since her death around eleven years ago, Mary has been taking flowers to Roe's grave several times each year, just "because Georgia would like them."

Others who recognize Kwan's deft touch and talent in floral design and selection offer comments online (Yelp.com; insider pages.com) like "the best florist you will ever find," "her flowers are on steroids," "always so beautiful and have an added personal touch" "she's amazing and friendly," "great florist!," and "flowers that look twice as expensive."

These much deserved tributes reflect the amazing growth and artistry of the once young flower lover who had little experience but a whole lot of ambition and ability.

