

PAUL JOSEPH CIENER

Born: March 11, 1939, Cincinnati, Ohio

Died: Oct. 1, 1998, Durham, N.C.

Known as: A business owner, real estate developer, economic development leader, and for the botanical gardens he envisioned as his legacy to the community.

Paul Ciener was a name and face many residents of Kernersville knew in the last few decades of the 20th Century. Whether he was debating town ordinances about building homes and commercial spaces, and planting trees, or in TV commercials selling Fords, his affable personality got and held audience attention.

“He presented himself so well,” said Lynn Everhardt in 1998, “and he was such an honest man that he felt that honesty would show through.” Everhardt worked at Ciener-Woods Ford since the beginning. It was the first of several businesses Ciener established in Kernersville.

But the thing he may be best remembered for is an enterprise he conceived but never saw; the botanical gardens that bear his name.

The eldest of four boys born to civil engineer Emanuel Ciener and his wife, real estate agent, Eileen Watts, Paul attended Jacksonville University, where he was recognized for his “leadership, effort and achievement” in 1963. The grandson of a Hungarian immigrant and the daughter of an early Cincinnati merchant family, he exemplified their entrepreneurial spirit.

He was the general manager for a Ford dealership in Eustis, Florida, but wanted to have his own dealership. He bought Grubbs Ford in Kernersville in 1975. A life-long gardener, he established Piedmont Carolina Nursery in the 1980s on land behind the family home in Colfax. In the 1990s, he began PCI Builders construction company.

An active participant in community development, he was a regular fixture at council and planning commission meetings, where he advocated for underground utility lines, smaller, shorter commercial signs and more plantings around parking lots and commercial spaces to “make it feel like a neighborhood.” He chafed under policies from the planning board that he described as “not really practical.” In 1998, he was tapped to chair the Economic Development Committee of the Kernersville 2020 community improvement project.

“Dad always wanted to help all ages grow and prosper,” said son David Ciener recently. “He felt he could have the most impact on children.” He supported local teachers, foster-care initiatives, and the East Forsyth High School Academic Team.

After being diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, and with only months to live, Ciener worked with his friend and



PROVIDED BY PAUL J. CIENER BOTANICAL GARDEN

Paul Ciener at a Japanese garden in 1989.

attorney, John Wolfe, to create the Paul J. Ciener Botanical Garden Foundation. He'd visited gardens across the country and in other countries and felt a public garden would be a great attraction to the town.

Today the 5-acre garden has spectacular displays of color and ornamental plants that draw thousands of visitors and hosts special events and weddings, and it also has a kitchen garden. He recognized that many people, especially kids, don't know where their food comes from or how it grows. He wanted to inspire young people to participate in home gardening and healthy eating and to spread the joy he found in gardens with everyone in the Triad.