

West Tampa plumber 'was able to achieve a lot by being kind'

Pete Busto opened Busto Plumbing in 1969 and supported a generation of local business owners.



Pete Busto, 82, of Tampa built a successful business and helped support a generation of business owners. "I hope that his impact will be that we remember that we can all be kind and generous to each other," said friend and Tampa City Council member Bill Carlson. [Courtesy Jason Busto]

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Pete Busto built a plumbing business that was responsible for renovations at Tampa International Airport, Amalie Arena and the working pipes of several generations of customers in Tampa Bay.

He helped build up something else that will likely last much longer — the lives of the people he knew. Busto died Feb. 7 at 82 of complications from congestive heart failure.

“He was unsung,” said Shirley Foxx-Knowles, Tampa’s longtime city clerk. “One of those unsung heroes who would do things behind the scenes and you didn’t know it was coming. I bet there are a lot of stories.”

There are.

Here are some of them.

The little things

Despite weekend plumbing work with his dad growing up, Busto wanted a job where he could wear a suit. When he was old enough, he started working at a department store. It wasn’t long before he went back to what he knew best and set up a small custom sprinkler company while working to get his plumbing license.

In 1969, he opened Busto Plumbing in West Tampa, the neighborhood where he grew up.

Busto, who had four children, Terri, Mark, Missy and Jason, kept an eye out for neighborhood kids, too, including Shea Hughes. Hughes, who was raised by a single mom, went with the Bustos on outings, including the circus, and took odd jobs at Busto’s to earn a little extra money.

“He just carried me along,” Hughes said.

When he was 12 or 13 and starting to get into trouble, Busto reached out to Hughes' father and encouraged him to get involved. When Hughes was 17, he walked into Busto's office and got a job.

A year later, Hughes started his own lawn service, which he built into Sunrise Landscape. Having an adult who was positive and kind "was his simple yet beautiful gift."

Joel McNatt started working for Busto in 1970. He saw all the ways Busto showed up for the people in his life — lining them up with lenders when it was time to buy a first home, buying savings bonds when they had their first children, sitting in the pews for family funerals.

They were little things, McNatt said, "that you realize later really meant something."

McNatt worked for Busto for 17 years before starting McNatt Plumbing Co. Busto never stood in the way, McNatt said, and taught him that the way to build a business with loyal customers was through fairness and hard work.

"If we could fix something that other companies would say, 'Hey, we're just going to replace that,' we always went the extra mile," McNatt said. "And I learned all that from him."

In 1997, Sergio Galicia started working for Busto Plumbing. He did not know the trade, so Busto paid for him to go to school to get his license.

Today, Galicia's someone who's been with the company the longest.





Pete Busto grew up in Tampa and spent his life there in business and as a vital part of the community. In addition to having four children, he had six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. [Courtesy Jason Busto]

FOPs

Jim Paleveda worked for Busto for more than a decade as a field superintendent. Busto often took lunch or cold drinks to his teams on hot days. And his company, while small, wasn't afraid to take on big jobs, Paleveda said, including replumbing the 42-story Regions Bank Building in Tampa.

That work was important for the company, but so were repeat customers.

When someone called for service, they'd often mention they were a "friend of Pete's." There were so many that staff gave them a nickname: FOPs.

"Once you became Pete's friend," Paleveda said, "you were Pete's friend for life."

In the mid- to late 1980s, Busto served on the city's code enforcement board with Foxx-Knowles. Sometimes they'd spend all day in meetings.

"He was a people person," she said. "He loved Tampa."

Busto also still loved dressing up, and Foxx-Knowles noticed.

"I used to tease him," she said. "He used to wear these real nice outfits. My nickname for him was SuperFly."

When Page McKee first moved to Tampa in the mid-'90s with the construction industry, he asked around about the best tradespeople.

Busto Plumbing came up a lot.

The two men worked together renovating all the public restrooms in TPA's transfer, ticketing and baggage claim areas, and they later won an award for that work.

Busto was always looking for solutions, McKee said.

On one project, when an error from another team meant all the toilets and tile work might have to be replaced, “he didn’t just sit back and say, ‘This is how much it’s going to cost,’” McKee said. “He went out and found a way to solve this problem. He just took that approach. We’re in it together ... When the going got tough, he was there by your side.”

And once Busto was there, he stayed.

Tampa City Council member Bill Carlson knew Busto through his son, Jason. When someone went after Carlson for his politics, Busto often called with a pep talk. He built a successful business by being honest and great at what he did, Carlson said.

But Busto’s way with people should be remembered, too.

“When people want to swing fists at each other or yell at each other,” Carlson said, “we should remember that he was able to achieve a lot by being kind.”

Pete Busto opened Busto Plumbing in West Tampa in 1969. He was a mentor to many small businesses in the community. [Courtesy Jason Busto]

Poynter news researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this story.