

Adobe founders bound together by friendship as well as profits

December 10 2009, By Mike Cassidy

I can't imagine there is any more room for awards on the mantels at John Warnock's and Chuck Geschke's homes. The Adobe co-founders have been honored by trade groups, engineering societies, magazines and universities. But the awards just keep coming.

Two months ago, it was the White House and the National Medal of Technology and Innovation. This week, it was San Jose City Hall and a commendation for being visionaries and starting a company that has brought much to the city. And though the two tech titans have won many awards, the latest round of recognition for the co-chairmen of software maker Adobe is beginning to feel a little bit like a victory lap.

Geschke is 70. Warnock is about to be. Neither of them plan to go anywhere soon, but sitting with them in a small room off the city council chamber it seems like a good time to reflect on the Silicon Valley [partnership](#) that belongs alongside Hewlett-Packard's Bill and Dave, Intel's Noyce and Moore and Apple's Jobs and Wozniak in the valley's pantheon.

And so I ask them: What do you see as your legacy? Neither balks. They do not protest. They do not duck behind the old valley chestnut about not being interested in looking back, about how this place is all about the future.

"When we started the company, neither of us expected what happened," Warnock says. "So if you think we had some grand crystal ball where we

thought we would be as successful as the company has been, we didn't."

Which is not a bad start, but let me help the legacy along. Here are two guys who basically launched desktop publishing by releasing PostScript not long after launching Adobe in 1982. They're the reason the document you create on your computer is the document that shows up when you click on "print." And if you open a PDF or prepare one to send around the world, you're also using software built by the company Warnock and Geschke built. If you've used Illustrator, Photoshop, Dreamweaver, Flash, you've worked with programs brought to you by the company brought to you by Warnock and Geschke.

The pair launched a company that posted \$3.6 billion in revenue last year and literally put their stamp on San Jose's skyline with the three Adobe towers along the Guadalupe River. They kept their company going through the valley's brutal business cycles and through Geschke's brutal kidnapping in 1992, when he was held for five days before being rescued by the FBI.

But sitting with Warnock and Geschke in a small room off the city council chamber, it's not hard to reach the conclusion that there is another part of the legacy that means everything to these two men. Through it all _ a hostile takeover bid by Quark in 1998, the battle for survival against a Microsoft-Apple alliance in 1989, living constantly in the profit-or-perish culture of [Silicon Valley](#) _ they have remained friends.

"For 30 years," Geschke says.

Sure, they can tell you their secret for running a successful company for decades on end.

"The simple answer is you hire people who are smarter than you are,"

Geschke says, "You compensate them well, and you give them enough freedom to be creative."

"And you always keep innovation at the top of the pile," Warnock says, picking up the thread. "Innovation and invention is what has saved Adobe from competitive threats through its entire history."

But they are insightful enough to understand that in the end, life and legacy are about relationships and how we've tended to them. Warnock says he and Geschke have never had a serious argument. Geschke says neither has ever ended the day mad at the other. His friendship with Warnock, he says, has been held together by mutual respect and trust.

It's telling that when I ask Warnock to name his best day at Adobe, he answers with a story in which friendship is at the center and the company is off to the side.

"Well," he says looking at Geschke, "when he got released by the FBI from being kidnapped. That was a pretty good day."

Not a bad day for Geschke, either. He had been abducted from Adobe's parking lot by two men who demanded \$650,000 in ransom. For days he was held bound and blindfolded, before FBI agents found him at a house in Hollister, Calif., and arrested his abductors, who were later convicted.

But Geschke remembers it for more than just that day.

"John and his wife, Marva," Geschke says, "were a huge support network for my wife, Nan, and for our family, for which I'll always be grateful."

The truth is, not even great companies last forever. Great friendships, however, are another matter.

JOHN WARNOCK:

- Position: Co-chairman, Adobe
- Career: Principal scientist Xerox PARC, professor at the University of Utah, co-founder and CEO of Adobe.
- Education: Bachelor's degrees in mathematics and philosophy; master's in mathematics; doctorate in electrical engineering from University of Utah.
- Family: Married to Marva Warnock; three children
- Other interests: Maintains www.rarebookroom.org and splendidheritage.com; on the board of the nonprofit Sundance Institute and the American Film Institute; on the boards of ebrary, Salon Media Group and MongoNet.

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CHUCK GESCHKE:

- Position: Co-chairman, Adobe
- Career: Principal scientist Xerox PARC; head of Xerox PARC Imaging Science Laboratory; co-founder and president of Adobe
- Education: Bachelor's degree in classics and master's in mathematics from Xavier University; doctorate in computer science from Carnegie Mellon University
- Family: Married to Nan Geschke; three children
- Other Interests: On the boards of the San Francisco Symphony; the

Commonwealth Club of California; Nantucket Boys & Girls Club; the Egan Maritime Institute, all nonprofits. On the board of Tableau [Software](#).

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