

Napa guiding light extinguished

29 Jul 2008 by Linda Murphy

Tom Shelton, former Joseph Phelps Winery president/CEO and a leader in the efforts to protect the integrity of the Napa Valley wine name, died 26 Jul at his Calistoga home following a long battle with brain cancer. He was 55.

Shelton joined Phelps in 1992, became president in 1994 and added the CEO title in 1995. He and former director of winemaking Craig Williams slowly overhauled viticulture and winemaking at Phelps, turning the under-performer into one of California's brightest stars, best known for its Insignia Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend and wines made from Rhône Valley grape varieties (though Phelps no longer makes the latter).

He also oversaw the creation of Phelps' Freestone brand – Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines made from vines planted on the cool Sonoma County coast.

With a for-the-good-of-all philosophy, Shelton expended great energy representing Napa Valley. He had a pivotal role in helping the Napa Valley Vintners organisation beat back a Bronco Wine Co (Fred Franzia of Two Buck Chuck fame) legal challenge to a California state law that says wine brands with "Napa" in their names must use at least 75 per cent Napa County grapes. Shelton also was instrumental in donating Phelps land for the construction of farm worker housing, and worked to change shipping laws that prevented out-of-state consumers from purchasing wines directly from wineries.

As reported [here](#), Shelton and Craig Williams, the Phelps winemaker for 32 years, resigned their positions in May 2008, after a long-simmering compensation dispute with the winery (founder Joe is chairman emeritus, and his son Bill is chairman of the company).

I found Shelton to be one of the most sincere, thoughtful men in the business. Whenever I phoned him to seek a comment about a thorny industry issue, he always took the call and answered frankly, without the brand-positioning blah-blah that spills forth from vintners who have been subjected to too many spokesperson training sessions.

Shelton is survived by his wife Laurie and their five children Bryan, Jonathan, Jessica, Trevor and Camille. A private family service is planned; a public celebration of his life will be held 11 Oct. For information, visit www.sheltonplace.com.