

# IN MEMORIAM

# RON SIMONS

By MELANIE JOHNSON

They called him “Mr. Cal Poly Pomona,” and for good reason.

**Ron Simons’** dedication to the university began as a college freshman during the Eisenhower Administration and continued for more than 50 years as he worked for the university for 43 years and remained involved in his beloved **Rose Float program** long after his retirement in 2012.

Simons died Aug. 26. He was 79.

His dedication to Rose Float was happenstance for the campus icon, also affectionately known as “Mr. Rose Float.” In a 2012 magazine article, Simons recalled joining as a freshman in the early 1960s when a roommate invited him to tag along to a meeting. Simons said he knew he had to be a part of it.

“Here we were, building something that was going to be seen by people around the world,” Simons said. “I’ll be honest, I was excited. I got hooked, and, as they say, the rest in history.”

“Ron Simons epitomized Bronco pride,” said **President Soraya M. Coley**. “His tireless dedication to the Rose Float program, the way he never stopped giving back to campus through his various philanthropic endeavors and the enduring legacy he left as Cal Poly Pomona’s fiercest champion will never be forgotten.”

During college, the old Rose Float lab was a second home for Simons. He celebrated his 18th birthday there. He put his signature on several floats over the years, including the starring role in the 1962 entry “Man on the Moon.” A University Archives photo shows Simons riding on that float dressed as an astronaut, seven years before Neil Armstrong planted the American flag on the moon.

He served as co-chair of the Rose Float Club in 1963 and chair in 1964. After graduating – for the first time – with an agronomy degree in 1964, Simons enlisted in the U.S. Army and entered Officer Candidate School. He returned to Cal Poly Pomona after serving three years and received a second degree in food, marketing and agribusiness management in 1969.

**Bob Pettis** (’63, agronomy) recalled how Simons brought the Rose Float program back to life when he returned in 1968.

“When he arrived on campus, Dean of Students **Henry House** met him at the door,” Pettis said. “Dean House told him, ‘We have

problems Ron.’ Ron was told there was no Rose Float committee from the previous year, no budget, no flowers and no interest on the part of students or the administration to do another float. ‘It stops here, or you can suit up again.’

“Ron Simons rose to the challenge, and while carrying a normal student load, he restarted the float program and on New Year’s Day, 1968; the Cal Poly float titled ‘The Mouse That Got Away’ rolled down the streets of Pasadena.”

The float won the Princess Award for excellence in animation, but it wasn’t the only reason for celebration. He met his wife, **Judy**, at a post-parade dinner.

After graduating the second time around, then University President **Robert C. Kramer** asked Simons what he wanted to do next. Simons complained that all of the Alumni Association work was being done out of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Cal Poly Pomona was a part of SLO in its early years, with students attending CPP for two years and completing their last two years at SLO, before Pomona earned its independence in 1966.

So, Kramer gave Simons the green light to start Cal Poly Pomona’s Alumni Association. Simons was the campus’ first director of alumni affairs and also served as assistant to the president. During his tenure at Cal Poly Pomona, Simons was key in creating the Division of University Advancement and served as associate vice president until his retirement.

“Ron Simons was a natural leader and communicator who knew that building relationships with alumni was the best way to strengthen the university and plan for its future,” said **Dan Montplaisir**, vice president for university advancement. “He set the standard for his team and understood that an investment in relationships would pay dividends in contributions, career placement for



graduates, and lifelong friendships.”

**Dale Wong** ('77, electronics engineering technology) was a graduate student and Rose Float volunteer when he met Simons in 1978. They grew closer when Wong helped design and install the lab's electrical system.

Simons was always the first on the scene if there were any issues with one of the floats, always showing up in his coveralls ready to work on the problems, Wong remembered.

“He was always positive. He never had a negative comment about anyone. His words were always to inspire,” he said.

In July 2021, the university completed construction on a new Rose Float lab. The structure was named **The Don Miller and Ron Simons Rose Float Lab**, recognizing the contributions of Miller, who started the program in 1949 and Simons, who built it up from where it began. Simons donated generously to both the Don E. Miller Rose Float Endowment and the Rose Float Building Complex fund.

Simons was a philanthropist. He led the fundraising efforts for the Aratani Japanese Garden project, the Voorhis Alumni Park and the renovation of Kellogg House Pomona. He was the first to receive the Cal Poly Pomona Distinguished Alumni Lifetime Achievement Award in 1996. He received an honorary doctorate from the university in 2012.

He was very giving to Pace Setters, the organization for retired staff and faculty, assisting club presidents, providing wine for luncheons and speaking at events.

“His unique sense of humor was his trademark,” said **Kathy Harcharik**, professor emerita and Pace Setters president. “Ron was the featured speaker at our 35th anniversary luncheon. He went over his allotted time, and no one minded. We were all being fully entertained. Ron was dedicated to making each activity a success and added a dimension of fun to everything he did.”

Alumni, Rose Floaters, faculty and staff remember Ron's impact on Cal Poly Pomona. View the virtual memorial wall at: <https://bit.ly/RonSimonsMemory>

# IN LOVING MEMORY

“From Ron, I learned what it meant to get involved and to be part of something that felt bigger than yourself. Ron believed in students and our potential. I remember him asking me, ‘Kid, what do you want your legacy to be? When all is said and done, when you are no longer on the campus, what is the mark you will leave?’ He wasn't asking me to do great things, nor to aim for fame or name recognition; he was asking me to reflect on how I saw my place at CPP. That snowballed into me thinking about the role I would play in my community and how it affects the bigger picture. I'll miss him calling me kid. I'll miss his stories. I'm heartbroken at the loss of the walking legacy and history that he was. I'll miss Ron. The world, and Cal Poly Pomona, was a better place because of him.”



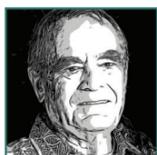
— **JUSTINE BUDISANTOSO** ('15, hospitality management)

“Ron was one of those people who always encouraged you to be the best you could be and to never give up. I considered him to be a great mentor, a trusted colleague, and a good friend over the years. He gave so much to Cal Poly Pomona, not only in building the university but also in inspiring and helping generations of students. He will be always in the hearts of those who were fortunate to work with him, whether it be a student, staff member, administrator, donor or community member. He always made me laugh with his exaggerated stories and his wit. Ron was truly Mr. Cal Poly. He absolutely loved Cal Poly Pomona. Thank you for all you have given to the university and rest in peace, my friend.”



— **DOROTHY “DE FORGE” ROBERTS** ('68, business administration; '78, MBA)

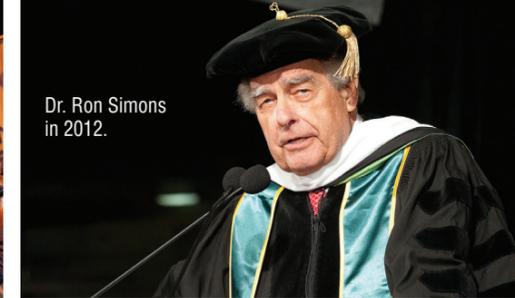
“I knew Ron Simons. I drove the float that carried Ron Simons, the astronaut, down the Tournament of Roses Parade route in 1962. When it was necessary for me to take a biological break during a delay in the parade, it was Ron leading a cheering mob of Rose Float spectators with the chant, ‘Richard, where are you? Richard, where are you?’ as the parade started moving again. He had a unique way of turning stressful moments into humor! As we grew older, Ron, Bob Pettis, Bill Jacobson and I would ‘celebrate’ our mutual December birthdays together, including others who wanted to join us in rejoicing in the memories of our years at Cal Poly Pomona. In the past year as Ron did battle with physical issues, it was Ron calling me to check on my well-being as I dealt with routine problems of aging. Ron and I shared 60 years of friendship, a bond that began with building a Cal Poly Rose Float. He was my friend, a friend to all, a mentor, a motivator and a true heart-and-soul Cal Poly Pomona Bronco.”



— **RICHARD EASTMAN** ('62, marketing management)



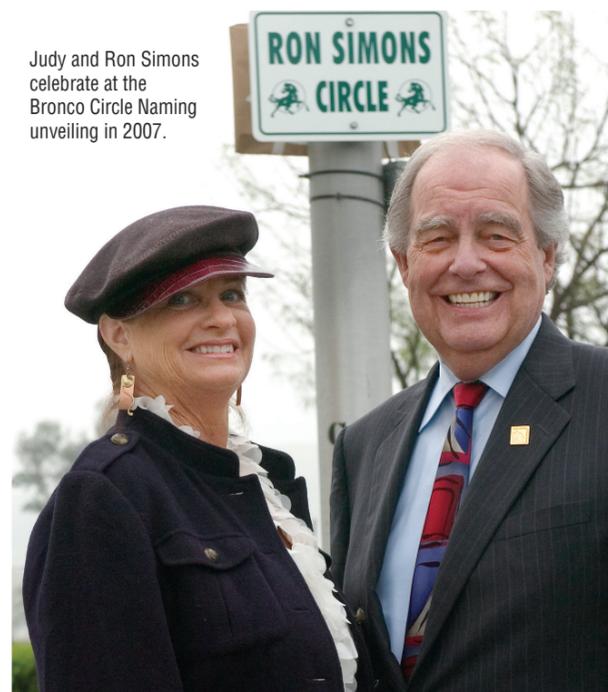
Leading a toast for “Galactic Expedition” in December 2010.



Dr. Ron Simons in 2012.



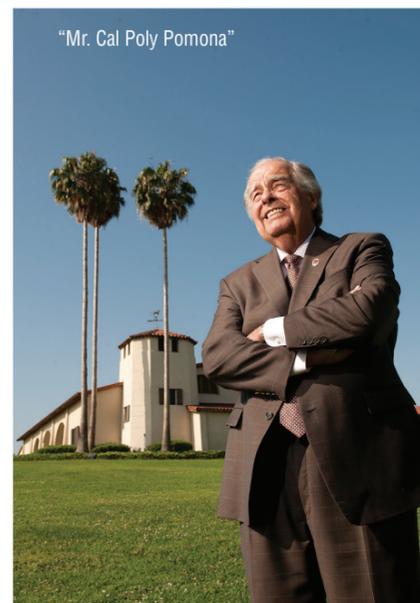
1964 Commencement



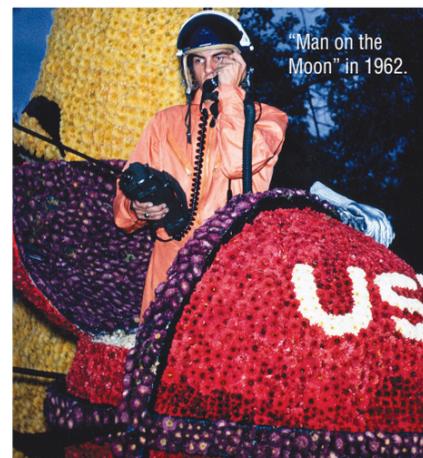
Judy and Ron Simons celebrate at the Bronco Circle Naming unveiling in 2007.



Simons crowns Sandi Beletrutti (Davis) the 1970 Poly Vue Queen.



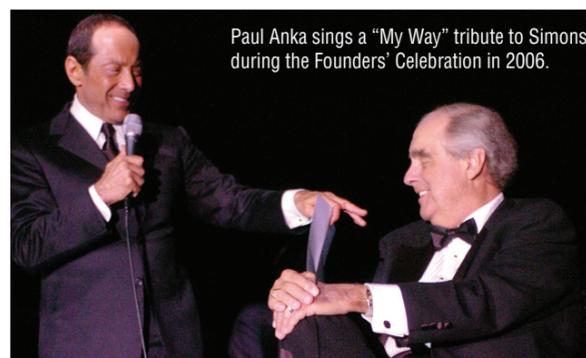
“Mr. Cal Poly Pomona”



“Man on the Moon” in 1962.



Founders' Society Dinner in 2007.



Paul Anka sings a “My Way” tribute to Simons during the Founders' Celebration in 2006.



Rose Float friends gather in 2019.



Simons gives a tour of the old Voorhis campus.