

Maui arborist had a passion for trees, education and his family

The Maui News July 13, '23

Ernie Rezens was in awe of trees, how much they gave to humans, their beauty and their incredible strength in holding up massive branches.

“I just admired the size of trees,” he told The Maui News during a 2015 interview from his home. “Right now, I’m sitting in my living room and I look out at the monkeypod trees, I look at the size and the strength and the shade that they give us.”

His passion inspired a gift to the University of Hawaii Maui College — a parking lot covered with a shady umbrella of trees that he and his students planted and provided proper care for, hoping that developers would follow the example.

On Sunday, a celebration of life to honor the late local arborist and educator will be held, fittingly, in “Ernie’s parking lot” at UH-Maui, one of the many green leafy signs of his legacy that he left on the island.

Rezens, 91, died on June 13 in Wailuku, surrounded by his family and with hospice care, according to his family, who is inviting the community to remember his life over a series of events this weekend.

A visitation will be held at 10 a.m. Saturday and a eulogy and Mass will follow at 11 a.m. at St. Joseph Church in Makawao.

The following day, a celebration of life will be held at “Ernie’s parking lot” from 3 to 6 p.m.

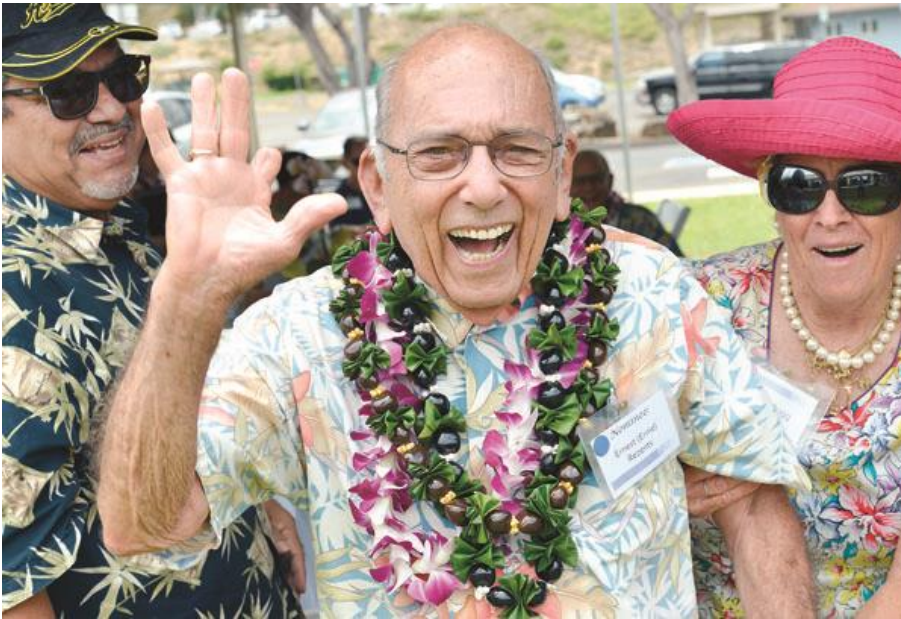
At 9 a.m. Monday, Rezens will be interred at Maui Veterans Cemetery in Makawao, the town where he made his home and raised five children with the love of his life.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that people consider donating to the Friends of Fleming Arboretum at Puu Mahoe. Rezens was born at the Puunene Hospital on Jan. 17, 1932, to Ernest and Victoria Rezens, who lived in Kanaha Camp, a neighborhood of about 30 houses located directly across from Kanaha Pond along Hana Highway, according to an obituary by his family. They later moved to a new house in Puuohala Village, where Ernie Rezens spent most of his childhood.



In 1950, he graduated from St. Anthony School and enrolled at UH-Manoa, studying secondary education with an emphasis in mathematics and science.

His first teaching job was at Honokaa, where he met Alene Humphries, a young public health nurse from California. She later transferred to Maui, and when Rezens was home for the holidays in 1956, he called the public health supervisor to help him track her down, hoping to take her dancing to the Molina Brothers Band on New Year's Eve at the armory. she accepted.



“She was the love of my life and she still is,” Rezens said a few years ago, his family recalled.

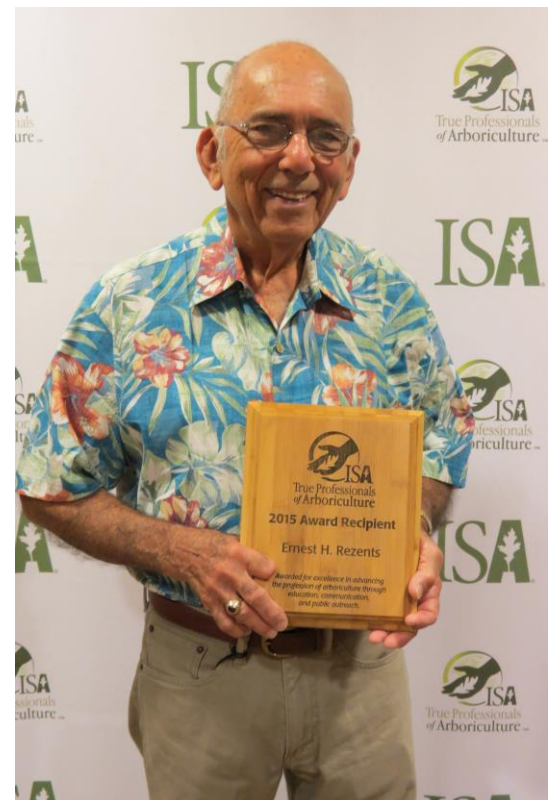
Rezens entered basic training and was stationed in Europe, but when he returned a few years later, he and Humphries married on July 12, 1958. Soon after, they bought an old house in Makawao, where they raised five children and turned the space into an urban forest with nearly 30 assorted trees in the yard along with hedges, flowers, orchids and a garden. The home served as a gathering place as the family expanded to 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

While known mostly for his knowledge of plants and trees, one of Rezens' early interests was electricity. In 1960 when he joined the faculty of Maui Tech, the precursor of Maui Community College, his first classes were teaching electricity and physics. From there, Rezens took a personal interest in the science of plants and pest control. He returned to school and majored in biology at the University of Oregon, followed by courses in horticulture at the University of California, Davis, seven years later.

Rezens was paramount in the stand-up and development of the Agriculture Careers program at the Maui college, including a classroom building, first-class equipment and a new greenhouse. He taught at the college from 1995 to 2015 and became a professor emeritus, mentoring hundreds of students along the way and writing columns for The Maui News on home gardening.

“Ernie is so humble, it’s hard to find out all the good stuff he’s done,” Elaine Malina, then-president of Maui Green & Beautiful, said in 2015 when he retired from the college. “Ernie is always an educator, when we’re planting trees next to him, he’s either teaching us or asking questions.”

In 2015, Rezens was one of three recipients in the world to receive the True Professional of Arboriculture Award presented by the International Society of Arboriculture. He also received the student-initiated Excellence in Teaching award from UH.



But perhaps his crowning glory was the Maui County Planting Plan, a 243-page manual on planting the right plants and trees in a community, with detailed instructions and maps of planting zones for Maui, Molokai, Lanai and Kahoolawe that were prepared by his friend and longtime forester Bob Hobdy.

Even as Alene and Ernie Rezens got older, they occasionally danced in the living room, the family recalled. Every morning for most of their marriage, he would brew coffee and take it upstairs to her. They would sit in bed and watch the birds, trees and West Maui Mountains in the early light. Alene Rezens died in 2020, and Ernie Rezens continued to live in their beloved house where he felt her presence every day, the family said.