

## Obituary: Poinsettia family matriarch 'Jinx' Ecke remembered as a mom, friend, businesswoman and philanthropist - The San Diego Union-Tribune

Wednesday, March 27, 2019, 10:19 AM

Cropped from: <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/communities/north-county/story/2019-03-26/obituary-poinsettia-family-matriarch-jinx-ecke-remembered-as-a-mom-friend-businesswoman-and-philanthropist>



Elisabeth "Jinx" Ecke photographed on the family's poinsettia farm in this photo taken in the late 1960s/early 1970s.

Courtesy of the Ecke family

[Elisabeth "Jinx" Ecke, who died Saturday at age 87, was the longtime wife of Paul Ecke Jr., who built Encinitas family's poinsettia business into an empire](#)

Ask four people to describe Elisabeth "Jinx" Ecke, the matriarch of Encinitas' famed poinsettia-growing family, and you'll get four stories. But all of them agree that the petite and energetic woman, who died Saturday at the age of 87, was a fun-loving force of nature.

Ecke rose from a childhood of poverty in the Great Depression to become the socialite wife of horticulturist Paul Ecke Jr., who built his father's farming operation into the nation's top-selling potted plant business. But her three children say Jinx worked hard as a corporate wife — even learning German to serve as her husband's translator on business trips abroad — and she never forgot her roots. After raising her kids, she spent the rest of her adult life as a volunteer and philanthropist.

"She had a very strong sense of giving back to people who were struggling, partly because of her very own modest childhood," said Sara Ecke May, the youngest of the Ecke children, who lives with her family in Raleigh, N.C. "She was a person who did a lot of good for a lot of people."

Jinx passed away from complications of Alzheimer's disease at the home of her middle child, daughter Lizbeth Ecke of Encinitas. She began experiencing memory decline about two years ago after living actively for several years at the La Costa Glen retirement community in Carlsbad. Before that, she spent a decade living among a large circle of friends in La Jolla following her mid-1990s divorce from Paul Jr., who passed away in 2002.

Born Elisabeth Joan Kenney on July 20, 1931, in Bloomington, Ind., she spent much of her childhood on the road, raising her three younger siblings while her parents looked for work in Indiana. When she was 14, her family headed west for a better life, choosing California because it had the most affordable state colleges.

On that road trip, Elisabeth reinvented herself as "Jinx," a lively and playful name she spotted on a movie theater marquee. The family eventually settled in subsidized housing where UC San Diego now stands. She enrolled at La Jolla High, where she became a baton majorette and helped support her family by working as a shop girl and a theater usher. She later worked her way through college at San Diego State University, where she earned a speech pathology degree in 1953, according to eldest child Paul Ecke III.

That same year, Jinx went on a blind date with her future husband, then a young Navy lieutenant who told a buddy he was looking for someone "short and with a sense of humor." Jinx was 5 feet tall. Paul Jr. towered over her at 5 feet, 7 inches. They married that fall and she moved to the Ecke family ranch house in Encinitas.

Beginning with Paul III's birth in 1955, she had three children over four years. Jinx was a hands-on mom, actively involving herself in the children's schools, scouting troops, camping trips and 4-H club. Paul III remembers his mom gamely trimming pigs' eye teeth in the barn and rescuing kittens and puppies abandoned by passers-by on their rural property. Sara recalls her mom arriving for "show and tell" at her fourth-grade classroom in a nice dress and high heels with a basket full of squealing piglets.

"I think everyone loves their mom, but she was really a great mom," Paul III said. "We had an idyllic childhood."

Jinx's children also remember their mom for her determination, her wicked sense of humor and her occasional "Irish temper." As a traditional '50s housewife, she couldn't have the independent career she wanted, so she fought for her daughters to have the same education and career opportunities as men, said Lizbeth, who is now senior vice president of the Carlitas Company, the Ecke family's real estate business. Lizbeth is also now president of the Los Angeles Flower Market, a position previously held by her father and grandfather.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Jinx was an ardent volunteer and fundraiser to the Republican Party, which led to her close 46-year friendship with Gayle Wilson and her husband, former California governor and senator Pete Wilson. Gayle Wilson said Tuesday that Jinx and Paul Jr. generously underwrote the cost for her to travel to Washington, D.C., for her then-fiancee's senatorial swearing-in ceremony in 1983. Wilson said she and Jinx enjoyed frequently traveling together.

"She was lots of fun, a gracious hostess, very generous and very thoughtful," Wilson said. "She was a true partner to Paul and a devoted mother who took the poinsettia business very seriously."

But Paul III said his mother became disillusioned with the Republican Party in the 1990s when it embraced the pro-life plank to its platform. Jinx was a longtime advocate for reproductive rights and Planned Parenthood, a position she adopted in the 1950s after one of her [girlfriends nearly bled to death](#) during a then-illegal abortion in Escondido.

Paul III said one of Jinx's proudest moments was in 2005, when Planned Parenthood opened the Vista-based Isabella Center, a family-planning clinic established in her name. She and her three children underwrote most of the cost of the clinic.

Among the many charitable organizations Jinx supported were the Magdalena Ecke Family YMCA, Rady Children's Hospital San Diego, Scripps Encinitas Hospital, the San Diego Zoo, San Diego State

University, La Jolla and Torrey Pines high schools, Voices for Children, the San Diego Women's Foundation, the Neurosciences Institute and the Country Friends in Rancho Santa Fe.

Besides Jinx's children and their spouses, she is survived by seven grandchildren, her brother William Bready Kenney and her sister Meredith Kenney Maler, both of San Diego.

Her children suggest donations in Jinx's name to the San Diego State University Library Fund, Office of the Dean, SDSU Library and Information Access, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, or to Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties, 1075 Camino del Rio South, San Diego, CA 92108.

A celebration of Jinx's life will be held at 2 p.m. May 26 in The Flower Fields at 5704 Paseo Del Norte, Carlsbad. That family-owned property was one of the Ecke family's original poinsettia farms and one of Jinx's favorite spots to visit.

Besides the final ranunculus blooms of the spring season, the service will feature some special out-of-season poinsettias that Paul III is having grown in his mom's honor.

"She loved flowers and she loved poinsettias," he said. "I think she would love what we're doing."