

His name's on the store — but he leaves much more on the landscape of Michigan

By Pat Shellenbarger



Fred Meijer

In his company's private plane above upstate New York, Fred Meijer asked: How many more sculptures should he buy before he died?

He was returning from a foundry in Beacon, N.Y., where he had helped send off to Milan, Italy, a 24-foot-tall bronze statue of a horse based on a design by Leonardo da Vinci. Its twin soon would be installed in the **Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park** near Grand Rapids, and Meijer had donated millions of dollars so both pieces could be completed.

For some, the addition of that monumental statue in 1999 was a capstone for the fledgling Meijer Gardens. But for Fred Meijer, it was more of a beginning.

“Fred, I think, was trying to understand what made a collection,” said Joseph Becherer, vice president and chief curator of Meijer Gardens. “Did three things make a collection? Did 30 things make a collection? I think he was trying to get his hands around what history would see as an important endeavor — not something fleeting, but something permanent.”

Frederik Gerhard Hendrik Meijer, who died of a stroke Friday at age 91, would build the garden's collection to about 300 pieces, making it the second-leading tourist attraction in Michigan and among the 100 most visited museums in the world.

While his name is associated with the orange and white signs in front of stores throughout Michigan and the Midwest, in West Michigan he is known first for his generosity. After spending most of his life building one of the largest private fortunes in the country, in his later years Meijer delighted in giving much of it away. He approached philanthropy with the same zeal that had built **Meijer Inc.**, the chain of some 200 stores throughout the Midwest with 60,000 employees and estimated revenue of \$14.63 billion in 2011.

In addition to Meijer Gardens, he and his wife, Lena, were the major donors for **Spectrum Health's Fred and Lena Meijer Heart Center** and its **Lemmen-Holton Cancer Pavilion**. They gave untold millions for countless charitable causes, including

acquiring miles of hiking trails and public parkland, creating a public broadcast center for **Grand Valley State University** and helping build the new headquarters for the **Michigan State University College of Human Medicine**.

“He said, ‘You know, spending this money is almost as much fun as making it,’” recalled Larry ten Harmsel, co-author of the biography *Fred Meijer; Stories of His Life*. “Fred would say, you know, I’ve had so much in my life, I hope other people can have that and live as long.”

Meijer’s father, Hendrik, a Dutch immigrant who opened the first store in 1934, was an anarchist, ten Harmsel said. His mother, Gezina, was a Stalinist. Their son would become one of America’s most successful capitalists.

He was the first retailer to combine a grocery store with a general merchandise store, considered a risky venture in 1962 when he opened the store on 28th Street in Grand Rapids. It became the model not only for future Meijer stores but also for the chain’s most formidable competitor, **Wal-Mart Stores Inc.** Years later, Meijer spurned a feeler from Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton, who wanted to buy the Walker-based chain.

“He was ahead of the marketplace,” said Ralph Hauenstein, a longtime friend and fellow businessman and philanthropist. “I think he had a great sense of clairvoyance. He knew what people wanted.”

Meijer was unusual among West Michigan businessmen. He was not overly religious and was a liberal on social issues, promoting civil rights and favoring a woman’s right to choose abortion. He was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. In the foreword to ten Harmsel’s biography, Meijer’s son, Hank, described his father as a “puritan with a rebel’s disdain for convention.”

In business, he was both a risk-taker and a fiscal conservative. He was willing to make bold moves, but usually with the assurance of success. Perhaps his greatest failure was the opening of seven **SourceClub** stores in 1991 to compete with Wal-Mart’s **Sam’s Club**. The next year, Meijer closed all SourceClub stores.

In recent years, when the company laid off hundreds of employees to remain competitive with Wal-Mart, he stood in the headquarters parking lot, consoling those newly unemployed.

Had his life taken the direction he originally intended, the Meijer chain might have ended with a few small grocery stores in West Michigan. He wanted to attend college and study history but agreed to help his father manage the growing business.

Meijer never was comfortable talking about his wealth. When *Forbes* first placed him on the list of the 400 richest Americans, Meijer called the magazine to say the money wasn’t all his but was divided among his three sons and various trusts. In subsequent lists, *Forbes* attributed the estimated \$5 billion fortune to “Frederick Meijer and family.”

Forbes recently listed Meijer Inc. as the 13th-largest privately held company in the nation.

For years, Fred and Lena Meijer lived in the same house they had built in 1957, only recently moving into a retirement home.

Even after turning over the company's reins to two of his sons, Hank and Doug, Meijer remained active in the business, often visiting the company's stores, chatting with customers and employees, even pitching in to pick up trash or bag groceries.

He was dressing for one of those visits when he suffered the fatal stroke.

He had long since prepared for his death, leaving the company in the hands of his sons and Meijer President Mark Murray, a former president of Grand Valley. He also left substantial endowments for Meijer Gardens and his other charitable causes.

When Meijer Gardens opened in 1995, it was projected to attract 75,000 visitors a year. It averages 550,000 a year and last year drew 640,000.

"It's an extraordinary legacy for Fred," said Becherer, the garden's curator.

His biographer, ten Harmsel, recalled that Meijer once said: "If I hadn't given the money away, we probably could have opened another 20 supermarkets. Why do we need another 20 supermarkets?"

"I think he never saw money as a thing people should gather up anyway," ten Harmsel said. "To him, money was a way to do good things in the world. He was happy about what it allowed him to do."