

Good evening, everyone.

Friends, colleagues, partners, and most of all, Robert J. Whitmore—RJ—thank you for being here to celebrate a remarkable career and an even more remarkable person.

Tonight already says so much.

We're in the Harbor Ballroom, a place RJ loves because harbors are where journeys begin, and where they come safely home.

There's a string quartet in the corner, tuning to Debussy—the same music that drifts from RJ's piano on quiet Sunday afternoons, when the phone is mercifully still and the to-do list is just weeds and roses.

It's fitting, because the story we're marking tonight has music in it.

Rhythm. Crescendos. Pauses that carried meaning.

Thirty years in tempo with a company that changed, markets that shifted, crises that came uninvited, and teams that rose to meet all of it together.

RJ joined us in 1996 as a Finance Manager.

It was a time of paper ledgers, dot-matrix printers, and conference calls that started with "Can you hear me now?" more often than they should have.

From the first month, he had that look when something didn't add up—not suspicion, but stewardship.

He didn't ask, "What can we afford?" so much as, "What should we stand for?"

That small difference in phrasing grew into a very large difference in outcomes.

In 2005 he took on the mantle of Vice President of Operations.

He moved from the quiet hum of finance floors into the noise and motion of the field, where progress smells like cutting oil and shipping crates.

He listened before he led.

He learned the names on second shifts and the nicknames on loading docks.

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When he spoke about throughput and cycle time, he could point to the line where a veteran tech taught a new recruit to fix a jam in five seconds instead of ten—and could tell you exactly why that mattered to the customer at the end of the chain.

By 2012, as Chief Operating Officer, he was guiding a global enterprise that would stretch—under his watch—to 28 countries.

He never made a map of flags; he made a map of people.

He could describe what our team in São Paulo did differently on Friday afternoons, and why the Singapore site started its day with a safety round that turned into a problem-solving sprint.

When we talk about “scaling,” we sometimes think of machines or servers.

RJ scaled trust.

He carried our standards without exporting our assumptions, and that’s why we’re better everywhere we operate.

If there’s a single initiative that shows RJ’s compass, it’s the Horizon Initiative.

When he first pitched it, some of us heard “reduce waste by 40%” and thought, well, that’s a nice aspiration for a slide deck.

But RJ didn’t pitch slides.

He convened a working group that mixed plant supervisors with procurement analysts, sustainability leads with the procurement folks who knew the price of every gasket.

He gave the team a long runway, and then he asked the question he always asks: “What would this look like if we were serious?”

Two years later, we weren’t celebrating a number; we were running a different kind of operation.

Waste was down 40%.

Cost curves bent.

Suppliers took pride in shared goals instead of hidden margins.

And the teams who made it happen began to expect more of themselves, because their leader expected more of the system and less of the heroics.

That was RJ's way

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Integrity wasn't a noun to be framed on a wall; it was a verb you could watch.

He told us that stewardship meant leaving something stronger than you found it, even if your name never appeared on the plaque.

He taught long-term thinking by reminding us that metrics have half-lives, while choices echo.

I'll tell you a story that, for many of us, fixed RJ's character in our minds.

There was a winter storm—if you were there, you remember—it caught a crew of field technicians between routes and shut them down in a place where the snow came in sideways.

We heard they were stranded, then we heard the hotel was full, then we heard the roads were closing.

By 8:30, RJ had called the hotel manager personally, found rooms in two different places, ordered meals to be delivered to both lobbies, and stayed on the line long enough to make sure the front desk knew every single name.

At 6 a.m. the next morning, after most of us had slept in warm houses, he was on the debrief call.

He listened to what went wrong, and he listened to what went right.

And then he said, "Spreadsheets measure costs. Our decisions measure values."

No flair. No speechifying.

Just a simple calibration everyone understood.

He carried that same ethic into how he championed people.

Not occasionally, not when the calendar told us to, but as his operating principle.

He was the executive sponsor for our employee resource group mentorships, and he didn't rubber-stamp quarterly updates—he sat in the rooms.

He connected rising talent with the old hands who could translate a company's unwritten language.

He asked mentees to speak first, and he asked mentors to do more than remember; he asked them to open doors.

The ripple effect is standing in this room tonight—the leaders he encouraged, the careers he interrupted in the best possible way by saying, "Have you

thought about this bigger role? I think you're ready."

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And to the first-generation leaders who looked around and didn't see many people whose path matched theirs, he made a different kind of promise.

He told them, "You are not here by accident. We've been waiting for you."

That line was so strong, it turned into a commitment: the scholarship fund in RJ's name, dedicated to first-generation operations leaders.

If you know RJ, you know he tried to argue for a different name on that fund—he always preferred to be the current in the water, not the lighthouse.

But it bears his name because it bears his imprint.

It says to someone we haven't met yet: we see you, we expect great things from you, and we're going to help you get there.

What animated all of this?

Yes, a ferocious grasp of operations.

Yes, the cool mind you want in the room when the board asks hard questions.

But also the steadiness of a servant leader.

RJ almost always chose the unglamorous edge of the table—where the notes are taken, where the calls are returned, where the numbers are checked twice.

He was consistent in a way that made the rest of us braver.

There are images of RJ at work that won't leave my head.

RJ at a whiteboard, drawing a value stream that somehow included a customer's Tuesday anxiety about a missed delivery.

RJ in a warehouse at dawn, tying back a sleeve to help measure a pallet that didn't match the manifest.

RJ walking slowly through a factory floor, stopping to ask an operator—not a manager—what would make the next hour safer than the last.

He saw around corners, yes.

But he also saw what was right in front of him, and he didn't pass it by.

And because he's a whole person, not just a title, we also know the other pictures.

RJ at the helm of a small sloop with the wind just forward of the beam, teaching

a nervous guest the feel of a tiller

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RJ at the piano, playing Debussy quietly enough that the evening holds.

RJ on a Saturday morning with soil under his nails, taking unhurried satisfaction in the order and mess of a garden.

RJ meeting with students through Junior Achievement, making balance sheets make sense to fourteen-year-olds by linking line items to their everyday lives.

Those passions weren't hobbies that sat outside his work; they enriched it.

Sailing taught him to watch the horizon and the water at once.

Music trained him to hear dissonance before it became a mistake.

Gardening reminded him that systems take time, and that pulling a weed is also an investment.

Mentorship gave him the joy of firsts—the first time a student solved a problem out loud, the first time a young colleague owned a room.

When you add it up—thirty years, a journey from Finance Manager to VP of Operations to Chief Operating Officer; a footprint that grew to 28 countries; a Horizon Initiative that cut waste by 40%; ERG mentorships that turned potential into progress—you could call it a legacy.

RJ would probably call it his job.

But we know better.

We know that cultures don't drift into excellence.

People choose it, day after day, and invite others to choose it with them.

There's a quiet refrain in how RJ speaks that I want to name tonight.

He never said, "I built."

He said, "We learned."

He never said, "I fixed."

He said, "We found a way."

It sounds small, but it isn't.

It teaches a company to see itself as a collective—one that can survive promotions, departures, even retirements—because its strength isn't housed in a single office.

Even so, there are goodbyes to say, and goodbyes are their own kind of work.

So let's talk about what comes next, and let's let that conversation be joyful.

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RJ, we wish you fair winds and following seas.

Not because we're trying to anchor your next chapter to a metaphor, but because we know you will actually be out there, trimming a line, reading the sky, finding your course.

We hope your days include quiet harbors, where you can hear the hull settle and the morning gulls quarrel over nothing important.

We hope your nights bring timeless music, maybe a new piece you've wanted to learn, maybe just Debussy again, because the familiar can be its own revelation.

We hope your garden forgives you for all the meetings it waited through.

May the tomatoes be generous and the mint respectful.

May the roses perform, and may the weeds keep you humble but not busy.

We hope, too, that you won't entirely leave us.

You've mentored so many of the leaders standing here, and the measure of your years ahead will include their triumphs.

This is a strange company metric, but let's make it one: how many notes you get that begin with, "You won't believe what happened today," and end with, "I remembered what you taught me."

May those notes find you often.

For anyone who wants to send a memory his way or share a photograph from these three decades, the team is collecting them at cto@kuchventures.com, so we can bundle them into something worthy of the journey.

Before the music starts and the talking grows louder than any single voice, I want to circle back to the reason we're here in this room, under these lights, while a quartet warms up a melody RJ loves.

We are here because it matters to say thank you—not just with a watch or a plaque, but with witness.

We saw what you did, RJ.

We saw who you were when it would have been easier to be someone else.

We saw the long-term choices you made when the short-term applause would

have been louder.

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We saw how you made inclusion tangible—how you asked the quietest person in the room the most important question, and then waited for the answer.

We saw you hold the line on promises that could not be broken, even when it cost the quarter something and saved the company everything.

We saw you build leaders without building shadows.

And because we saw it, we can carry it.

That is the best tribute we can offer.

Not a story preserved under glass, but a standard lived in the open.

If spreadsheets measure costs and decisions measure values, then let our decisions tomorrow show that we understood the lesson.

To the family and friends who shared RJ with us—to the ones who saved him a seat at dinner when a flight ran late, who learned to love acronyms they never asked for, who watched the phone light up during vacations and saw him choose to set it down more often than not—thank you.

You were part of this work, too.

Your patience let his patience travel farther than any itinerary could.

To the teams who served with him—across 28 countries and countless time zones—thank you.

You made the music real.

You took an initiative like Horizon and turned it into muscle memory.

You took mentorship and turned it into momentum.

And to you, RJ, for the last time in this particular role, and for the first time in the one that follows:

Thank you for the integrity that did not flinch.

For the stewardship that treated every resource—capital, human, environmental—as if the next generation would audit our souls.

For the long-term thinking that protected us from our own impatience.

For the inclusion that made the circle wider and the center stronger.

For the servant leadership that put the work and the people first, and somehow

made the results take care of themselves.

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May your next charted course bring you home in ways that surprise you.

May the leaders you mentored surpass you in ways that delight you.

May your days be generous with unhurried time, and your nights full of timeless music.

Fair winds and following seas, RJ.

And from all of us: thank you.

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