

My day with José

There is no doubt in my mind that the nursery and greenhouse industry has been a leader on production of plants and labor in agriculture. You, as industry members, treat your plants and your people well.

It is critical that all sizes of nursery operation thrive in the big sea of the economy. It doesn't matter whether you are a small two-person nursery, or a mega-shipper to all reaches of the nation and globe. Our shared fate on immigration and labor supply depends on everyone working together to grow our nation back to economic health.

Unfortunately, our forward progress on this issue has sagged under the weight of D.C. dysfunction, while talk show hosts rack up cheap political points.

Our nation must do better, and our industry must lead the way.

Rocks at glass houses

In my duty as your executive director, I speak to the media, lawmakers and stakeholders about everything that impacts your business — from land use and tax policy, to regulation, trade between states and labor.

Several years ago, I went on a conservative talk radio show to discuss our broken immigration system. Our coalition partners warned about the folly of trying to convince those who disagree about the merits of fixing the system (and with it, our economy). I challenged the talk show host to put away his political point of view and go out and do a day's worth of work in the shoes of the immigrant labor he found so repulsive.

"Do it, and you will see," I pleaded. He declined.

When I hung up the phone, I realized I was as guilty as any xenophobic talking head. I had not stepped outside my comfort zone and labored alongside our hard-working nursery people.

My next call was to Jerry Simnitt at Simnitt Nursery. I told him I wanted to experience a day of nursery labor. Jerry agreed, on the condition that I do it twice — once in the cold heart of winter and once in the heat of summer.

"It is really two different kinds of work," he said. I had no clue how right he was.

Trying to fill the shoes of a farm worker

I arrived on a 19-degree day in Canby, Oregon, and was greeted by the co-owners/brothers Jim and Jerry Simnitt and their foreman, José.

I admitted I was an unskilled worker and did not want any special accommodation. Amusement and doubting eyes met my cavalier statement. I was assigned to the hip of José for the day. I am sure the seven-person crew looked at me and thought I was just there for a "grip, grin and go" — a quick photo shoot before departing by mid-morning to go see legislators, visit other OAN members, or attend to "sudden" duties back at the office.

It wasn't the case. We spent a good portion of the day getting plants separated and trimming countless *Pieris* shrubs. I passed the long, hard hours with five-second mantras that I repeated to myself: "Don't cut my fingers off. Do good work."

At lunch, I was able to get to know the crew, hear about their families and truly understand their commitment to working in agriculture. It was humbling to see their pride in honest work.

When I came back the next summer, the temperature was in the low 90s. My assigned task was attending to a field in need of planting rhododendrons. The crew was warm and receptive to my return and made me feel like I was returning to a family.

The crew's skill and speed in planting was clear to me.

I could not understand but a few words of Spanish. Every once in a while, I would lose track of a crew member.

Then I looked back at my row and saw that my planting line looked like I had failed a field sobriety test. They were taking turns coming up behind me to fix my work. They appreciated my effort, but I was a horrible nursery worker. My respect only grew.

The one constant, other than the Simnitt brothers, was the foreman, José. His story is one that mirrors what many know to be truth behind the politics of immigration. He has a deep love for the nursery and for his family.

José came to the United States at 19 years old. He used the 1986 Simpson-Mazzoli Act to become legal, and during the 1990s, he applied and passed the test to become a citizen. He then legally brought his wife from Mexico. Together, they raised three daughters.

I learned that the people from Guanajuato, Mexico, came to Oregon in the 1970s to harvest crops for local farmers. Many of them settled in the fertile agricultural lands of the mid-Willamette Valley.

José owns a home, and his children have graduated high school and attended college. He is educated, bilingual and hard-working. His immigration story says far more than I could express on a talk show, an editorial opinion in a paper or testifying before a legislative committee.

I recognize that walking a few days in the shoes of immigrant workers does not qualify me to understand what it feels like to do that job every day. Nor does it let me completely grasp the real challenges of the small, medium or large nursery. However, it did give me perspective and deep respect for what you do.

Thank you, Simnitt Nursery, and thank you, José. ☺



By Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Stone'.