

# GROWERTALKS

## SAF in the Lobby

4/29/2016

### In Congressional Meetings, SAF Members Speak Up for Industry Needs

*Society of American Florists*



Close to 90 floral industry members who gathered in the nation's capital for the Society of American Florists (SAF) 36th annual Congressional Action Days (CAD) in early March brought determination, stories of hard work and practical, targeted solutions to dozens of meetings on Capitol Hill.

It's clear that SAF members took their civic duty seriously and ended the annual two-day conference with a sense of deep satisfaction, not to mention smartphones filled with names, phone numbers and emails from congressional staff members and other industry members around the country.

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*Pictured from left to right, Ed Cronin from FTD, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-9-IL), Marvin Miller and Cees Boonman of Ball Horticultural Company.*

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"In my mind, SAF's Congressional Action Days is really one of our industry's most important events," said Dr. Marvin Miller, market research manager with Ball Horticultural Company and a member of the SAF board of directors. "It gives us a chance to impress our lawmakers with the understanding that we are an industry and that their actions do affect our families, our employees, our businesses and our communities. When we go to the Hill as a 'floriculture industry,' our lawmakers suddenly learn there is a whole market channel and a whole supply chain of events that brings flowers and plants to the marketplace."

This year's event—co-sponsored by BloomNet, CalFlowers, FTD and Teleflora—focused on two key issues: immigration reform and the STARS Act, an SAF-sponsored bill that will clarify the definition of seasonal workers in the Affordable Care Act. On both issues, SAF members provided real-world solutions to complicated challenges.

By clarifying the definition of seasonal employees/workers in the ACA and simplifying the methods seasonal employers use to determine business size, the STARS Act has been called a common sense solution by many people. Before lawmakers can support the fixes the law provides, however, they have to understand the problems that exist.

For the past several years, SAF members have played a key role in bringing the challenges and the STARS Act to the attention of Congress, and this year was no exception.

First time attendee Dr. Mark Yelanich of Metrolina Greenhouses scored a major victory when he and the rest of the North Carolina delegation at CAD secured Rep. Robert Pittenger (R-N.C.) as a new co-sponsor of the STARS Act.

The North Carolina group met with a legislative assistant to the congressman, and shared stories of how the confusing, sometimes conflicting, definitions in the current law hurt their businesses, a topic Yelanich, a member of the SAF Grower Council, knows all too well.

“Mark really did a great job explaining how the issue affects his business,” said Debby Sacra, of The Blossom Shop in Charlotte, who was at CAD with her husband Ted Todd.

Those “from the field” stories were among the group’s greatest resources, but they weren’t their only advantage. In fact, Sacra and Todd designed the floral arrangements for the wedding of the congressman’s daughter and Yelanich attended the event.

For both first-timers at CAD and SAF members who have been coming to D.C. for years, the value of taking time away from the daily work of running a business became clear by the end of their day on Capitol Hill after hours (and miles) spent walking to lawmakers’ offices.

“It’s so important to keep our representatives knowledgeable about the floral industry’s issues,” said grower Robert Kitayama of Kitayama Brothers.

“I always feel very empowered by my involvement at Congressional Action Days,” said David Mitchell of Mitchell’s Flower Shop, and a past chairman of the SAF’s former Government Relations Committee (now the Government Joint Council). “Meeting with our representatives and having them listen to our stories and hear our concerns reminds me that we live in a great country that values all of its citizens.”

Mitchell was part of an Illinois delegation that included Marvin Miller and Cees Boonman from Ball Horticultural Company. The delegation visited all of the 18 congressional offices in the state of Illinois.

Anne Stewart of Smithers-Oasis said a staff member for Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) was “very interested” in the issues presented in the STARS Act. “She promised to bring it forward to the congressman and asked us to leave materials behind,” she said.

Likewise, a staff member in the office of Sen. John Thune (R-South Dakota) was “positive” and sympathetic to the needs for streamlined regulations in immigration reform, said Jackie McCartan and Professional Floral

Communicators-International Trustee Jenny Behlings of Jenny's Flora.

“He spoke of other agriculture industries in our state that are also affected, including sheep/wool and poultry producers.”

Those requests for more information and connections aren't niceties, insist Washington insiders such as Shawn McBurney, SAF's senior director of government relations. Instead, they're critical stepping stones to stronger relationships between constituents and lawmakers.

Rod Crittenden, executive vice president and CEO of the Michigan Floral Association, added that floral industry members can “move our industry positions forward” when they come together. “There is strength in numbers,” he added.

For Mona Haberer of Hortica, CAD “gave me a better understanding of the political process and was a great way to network with floral industry peers,” she said. “It was definitely worth the time and effort.”

Tim Galea of Norton's Flowers & Gifts called the event “our best opportunity to influence legislative issues that are relevant to our industry. Plus, it's the easiest way to get a peek behind the curtain of Washington politics.”

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*“SAF in the Lobby” is produced by the Society of American Florists. Visit [www.safnow.org](http://www.safnow.org). For more information on legislative issues, contact the Government Relations Department*