

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Facing Life-or-Death Situations

Brian Groves



BRYAN GROVES

(Editor's note: I'd like to welcome Brian to the GrowerTalks contributing staff. We're excited to have him, and you'll see with his first column, his insights will be invaluable.—JZ)

As I'm writing this, the past 24 hours have extracted an enormous emotional toll on our entire team. Last night, several of our H-2A team members were returning home to their families and had just crossed the border into Mexico on a Greyhound bus. We'd offered to fly them home, but the airports were intimidating (rightfully so to non-experienced travelers), so they opted for the more familiar bus. At this point, they were more than 24 hours into their journey back home to see family they hadn't seen since March.

We don't know the exact turn of events, but the bus was stopped and several people were taken hostage by one of the cartels. Two of those people taken were our team members. Again, we know little details, but by the next morning when we got to work we were faced with the reality that people we'd worked side-by-side with last week were now held against their will, with a ransom payment demand in exchange for their lives. Family members shared video with us of the men bound and blindfolded. Truly, a terrifying reality.

What do you do in scenarios like this? How, as humans, do you comfort the family members and coworkers of people in an active hostage situation?

There isn't a playbook for situations like this. We called our H-2A facilitator and it was a scenario they'd never experienced before. We called authorities in the U.S. who, honestly, weren't very concerned about the welfare of Mexican nationals in Mexico. Family members attempted to contact authorities in Mexico and the advice they got was not very encouraging—delays in paying the ransom would likely result in their deaths.

As sporadic communications evolved, the ransom amount increased. The ransom payment was cobbled together and eventually routed to the cartel. After confirming the payment went through, they communicated that the men would be released to a neutral location within the next hour. But hour after hour dragged on with no word.

That's when the chaos of the day finally hit me. It was easier to keep going through the day when it was busy and chaotic and people needed stability. But when darkness fell and the day was winding to a close without the promised good news, it was impossible not to weep. It was hard to keep the worst-case scenarios at bay mentally and emotionally as the hours ticked by.

Thankfully, we got word later that night that the men were found alive and generally okay. They were no longer captives fearing for their lives. God only knows what those 24 hours entailed and what the road ahead looks for them.

I have such respect for those who are willing to leave their families for months on end to come work with us. We feel the weight of providing them with the best possible living and working conditions while they're here, and moving forward we'll have to find a better transportation arrangement, as well.

We're so thankful that the situation was resolved and even more thankful for our H-2A workers who risk so much to come work with us year after year. Our prayer is that they're blessed with safer travels this year. **GT**

Brian Groves is the second generation at Panoramic Farm. His background in engineering has proved beneficial as Panoramic recently added a greenhouse division to the existing nursery operations. Brian's main responsibilities are designing and overseeing expansion projects, implementing new technologies and process/IT improvements.