¿Are Your Hispanic Workers Safe?

Barbara Mulhern

A 37-year-old experienced Hispanic tree trimmer was trimming branches on a palm tree when he suddenly fell 40 feet to the ground and died. An investigation showed that he was wearing a safety belt, but the spring-loaded latch that connected the chain to the D-ring of the belt had broken. A secondary safety rope was not being used.

A 20-year-old Hispanic worker from Mexico was on a crew that was removing trees at a suburban home. As he fed branches into the chipper, he used his foot to push them into the hopper. A section of the tree top caught his shoe, pulling his leg into the chipper. The worker died.

A 39-year-old worker from Mexico who spoke limited English was on a crew that was removing trees from the front yard of a home. The company owner had placed the bucket of a front-end loader against a tree to help direct its fall. He then made cuts near the bottom of the trunk. The tree fell about 90 degrees to the left of where the owner had planned, striking the worker on the head and killing him as it came down.

And a 49-year-old Hispanic worker was about 30 feet up in a pecan tree, using a pruner pole to remove web worms. The pole was fully extended, and close to nearby power lines. He unexpectedly lost control of the pole, which made contact with the live power lines. The worker was electrocuted.

These are just a few of the many examples of deaths of Hispanic/Latino workers in the tree care industry nationwide. While tree care is a dangerous business to begin with, add to that the complexity of effectively communicating safety to a growing non-English-speaking, non-native population, and the potential for serious injury or death is compounded.

Employees on the job for Arborwell of Castro Valley, California. Approximately 61 percent of Hispanics in the United States are working-age adults (18 to 64 years old), and by the year 2020, Hispanics are expected to account for nearly half of the growth of the entire U.S. labor force.

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Scott Jamieson

"I am not sure that we as an industry have our arms around all of this," Joe Tommasi, manager of safety and loss prevention for The Davey Tree Expert Company in Kent, Ohio, says. Tommasi, who has worked in the industry for more than 30 years, adds, "I think at times what you run into is that the managers running the business get frustrated trying to fill spots in the work force. But are they really ready to embrace these workers' cultures? These workers also bring with them whatever safety practices exist in their old

country, and you have to try to undo them."

Scott Jamieson, president and CEO of The Care of Trees in Wheeling, Illinois, says that his company's field staff is approximately 55 percent Hispanic. Jamieson believes that there is "a pervasive feeling, particularly in the tree care industry, that accidents and getting hurt is just part of the job. We need to change that mentality to, 'No one needs to get hurt,' " he says.

Dying on the job

What are the chances that one of your Hispanic workers is going to get injured or killed? Or, for that matter, if you don't now employ any Hispanic workers, what are the chances that you will in the future?

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, more than 40 million Hispanics now live in the United States, comprising 14 percent of the total U.S. population. Hispanics are not only the United States' fastest growing minority group, but also the largest. In addition, Hispanic immigrants have birth rates twice as high as those of the rest of the U.S. population. Approximately 61 percent of Hispanics in the United States are working-age adults (18 to 64 years old), and by the year 2020, Hispanics are expected to account for nearly half of the growth of the entire U.S. labor force.

Statistics aside, all you need to do is look around you to see the growing number of Hispanic workers in the tree care industry. Chances are high that if you don't now employ any of these workers, you will in the future.

While this potential future supply of workers is good news for the industry, it remains a sobering fact that Hispanic workers are disproportionately getting killed on the job in the United States. One Associated Press study, which looked at the death rates of Mexican workers across all occupations from 1996 through 2002, concluded that Mexican workers are dying on jobs in the U.S. at the rate of one person per day.

"These accidental deaths are almost always preventable," the researchers said. Among the common issues that arose in many of these deaths were language barriers, a fear of asking questions due to being in the U.S. illegally, lack of training, lack of safety equipment, and such cultural issues as safety expectations "that don't discourage risk-taking."

Employees at Adirondack Tree Experts in Beltsville, Md., sporting their chaps and other personal protection equipment for a TCIA Accreditation inspection.

Spanish is not enough

Let's say that you do have non-English speaking, non-U.S. born employees at your company. Regardless of whether those numbers are high or very few, no one wants to be in a position of having to make that call to Mexico or elsewhere to tell a worker's family that he or she has just been killed on the job. So what do you do?

A good first step is to know your own work force and its composition. "A company has to know what its work force is made up of – how many are Hispanic," says Gordon Ober, vice-president of recruiting and development for The Davey Tree Expert Company. "Ours runs in pockets. As much as one-third of our field work force is Hispanic. In some regions, we can be 90 percent to 100 percent Hispanic. Having a Hispanic supervisor is critical to our training. The solution isn't just language training. We can't assume that the message is going to be delivered and accepted properly unless someone is right there who has a fluency in safety training and is bilingual."

Joe Engberg, field safety and training manager for The Care of Trees, says that "generally, if we have somebody who doesn't speak English, we assign them to a crew leader who speaks Spanish. We make sure that their crew leader can communicate with them. When doing our job briefings and planning, it is very important that people understand all of the hazards and that everyone is able to communicate with each other. There should never be a situation where there's somebody on the crew who can't talk with others."

Language, however, as Ober indicated, is only a small piece of the puzzle. Being able to speak Spanish is not enough. The worker's crew leader or other supervisor, as well as anyone else involved in safety training, needs to understand the varying

literacy and cultural issues that may impact effective understanding of life-and-death safety messages.

Here is a hypothetical example: A tree care company with a growing Hispanic work force has safety signage in both English and Spanish. It also "tests" its native Mexican workers in Spanish to ensure comprehension of important safety messages. Much to the owner's/manager's surprise, he discovers while investigating a "near miss" accident that several of his Spanish-speaking employees could not read the Spanish-language safety signage. Moreover, they had guessed at the answers to the questions on the written Spanish-language quiz because of limited literacy in their own native language.

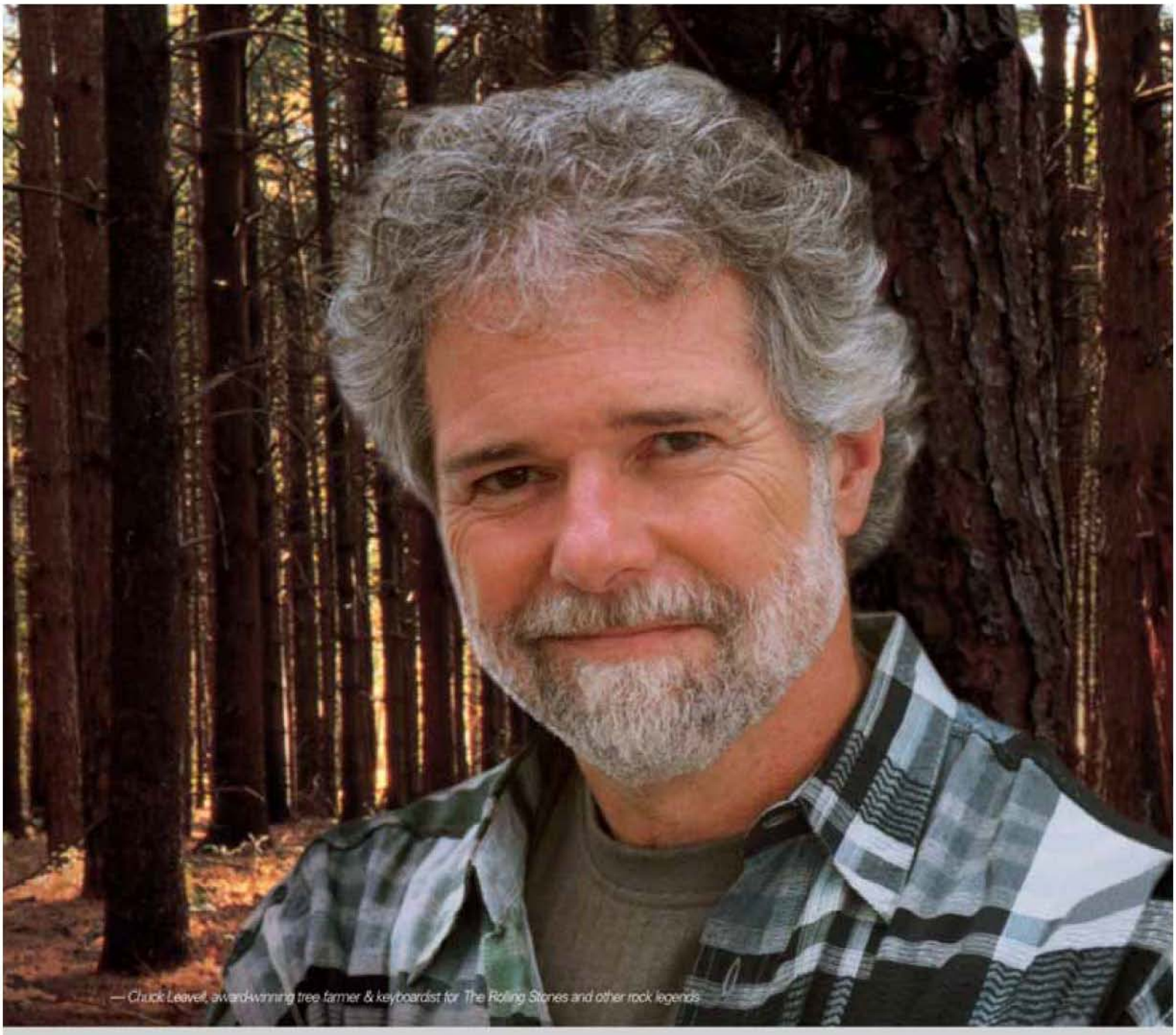
Upon further investigation, the owner/manager realized that a number of his workers, who had little or no opportunity for schooling in Mexico, were from rural Mexican villages, and that the Spanish they use is completely different than that of his Mexican employees from larger urban areas.

The ability to effectively communicate critical safety messages also involves understanding your workers' cultures.

Sound like a nightmare? Unfortunately, it can be. Yet reading and writing capabilities and different dialects of the same language are still not the entire issue. The ability to effectively communicate critical safety messages also involves understanding your workers' cultures.

"In Florida, we have quite a few Hispanic workers, and a lot of different dialects – Mexican, Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, etc. You can't just think: 'I've just translated this into Spanish' and be done," says Doug Worley, safety trainer for The Davey Tree Expert Company's Gulf Region. "I know I'm not getting through to a guy when he just smiles and nods his head. And if I stare at him, nobody's going to listen at all."

What does Worley mean? In most Hispanic cultures, there is a strong work ethic, plus a desire to "please" the "boss" and show that the person conforms. Many green industry safety trainers have run into situations where their Hispanic workers will continually nod their heads and say "yes" or "si" when asked if they understand a safety message – only to



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10 Tips from a Fatality Investigator

Hank Cierpich, a safety engineer and investigator with the California Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) program, has investigated the deaths of many Hispanic workers – including those in tree care – over the years. He believes that the high number of Hispanic workers dying on the job in the United States is both unacceptable and preventable.

Cierpich recently spoke at the 12th Annual AgSafe Conference in Seaside, Calif., and had these suggestions for tree care companies and other employers that have Hispanic workers:

- Make your safety training site-specific. Train on the job (versus in a classroom or another location).
- Use "real" photos in your training. In other words, don't be afraid to show your Hispanic workers graphic photos of what could happen to them.
- Provide "hands-on" training. Never assume that one of your workers understands how to operate a chain saw, chipper, or other equipment until a supervisor has monitored (and signed off on) the person demonstrating actual use of the equipment.
- Encourage employee participation in safety presentations.
- Keep it simple. Prepare low-literacy materials (including materials in Spanish), and "don't be using college words or $10 words when you can use a 50 cent word."
- Use "show and tell" sessions to ensure that knowledge has been gained.
- Encourage teamwork.
- Make training interesting.
- Don't tell your workers to "go do it." Instead, "do it with them."
- Show your Hispanic workers that you care. "Show them that you respect them, and that they are human beings – not entities you can push aside."

find out later that they did not. And staring at the person will only make it worse. That's because in most Hispanic cultures, direct eye contact, especially with persons in "authority," is considered disrespectful.

Ober has these additional examples of cultural issues it is important to understand:

▸ Your Hispanic workers likely won't raise their hands during a training session and say "stop." They might be embarrassed that they can't read. Or, they may be in the United States illegally, and don't want to draw attention to themselves.

▸ Expect to have some trouble getting Hispanic workers to step forward for additional training necessary to move into higher positions. "Some don't want to be the 'boss man' because they don't want to be perceived (by their peers) as being the boss man," Ober explains.

▸ Hispanic workers, especially those who are not bilingual, may have their heads down when the supervisor (or "boss man") comes by. They are likely fearful of getting caught "not working."

Effective communication

Ober, Worley, and Ron Jester, executive director of the Delmarva Safety Association – an organization involved in a partnership aimed at reducing injuries and deaths among Hispanic workers in the green industry – offer the following tips:

▸ Know what tools are available to assist you. Even if you have a small company with a limited budget, many free bilingual resources are available on the Internet. (See sidebox.) Also, many English/Spanish safety videos have been produced, and some are available at low cost.

▸ Make use of your current employees. At Swingle Lawn, Tree, and Landscape Care in Denver, Colorado, for example, Trim Supervisor Shane Vosberg says that the company has a couple of bilingual Hispanic employees and a Cambodian employee who have been there for a number of years. These employees assist in relaying safety messages to other workers

from their same cultural backgrounds. "For example, we have a group of employees with Cambodian heritage, and this one individual will get the guys together and cover topics and questions we discuss in (safety) meetings," Vosberg says.

▸ Stress "family" in your safety training. Because "family" is so important within Hispanic cultures, presenting your safety messages in terms of what they mean to your Hispanic workers' families will go a long way. One example Jester uses is that when you explain how to operate a wood chipper, tell your Hispanic workers that it is important to carefully follow directions so they don't get seriously injured or killed and are still "able to provide for their families."

▸ Conduct training orally and in Spanish whenever possible. Remember that some of your workers may not be able to read or write, even in their own native language. Stay away, if possible, from written "testing" to determine comprehension of a safety lesson.

▸ Be aware that "risk-taking" may be a valued norm in your workers' native country(ies). Undoing this can be especially difficult with young, male Hispanic workers. "A lot of times, people will be too eager to do something they haven't been instructed in," Worley says. "This isn't just with Latinos. If I have you near a chipper, I'm going to make sure you have extensive training and are monitored."

▸ Encourage your workers to learn English, and strongly consider learning some Spanish. "We have a supervisor in Tampa who is from Guatemala who has pushed with all of his people that they need to be bilingual. He'll take a brand new person and tell them that the way to get ahead in life is to be bilingual," Worley says.

▸ Work hard to promote Hispanic workers into supervisory positions. "Providing these opportunities is very important," Jester says. "Remember that promotion is a process, and taking cultural sensitivities into account is very important. For exam-

ple, having a female supervisor may be a source of friction for first-generation Hispanic men. In addition, there are social hierarchies to consider, and issues when promoting the young over older workers."

Probably the most important thing you can do to effectively reach your Hispanic employees with your safety messages is to "show them that they are valuable," Ober says.

"When you look at what most motivates any worker, it's the feeling of being involved, the feeling of being appreciated – it's the non-monetary things," he says. "Saying, 'Hey, you're really doing a good job' needs to be done with your Hispanic workers, too, so they know they're not expendable."

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Hispanic worker safety resources

Numerous free resources are available on the Internet to assist you in effectively communicating safety issues to your Hispanic employees. Among them are:

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) Spanish-language Web page: www.cdc.gov/spanish/niosh

OSHA's Spanish-language Web page: www.osha.gov/as/opa/spanish/index.html

Additional OSHA Hispanic resources: www.osha.gov/dcsp/compliance_assistance/index_hispanic.html

Oregon OSHA's bilingual tailgate lessons and PowerPoints: www.cbs.state.or.us/external/osha/educate/peso.html

The Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET) bilingual Safety Tips Sheets: www.landcarenetwork.org/cms/programs/safety.html

Reports of FACE investigations of fatalities of Hispanic workers in the United States, including some within the tree care industry: www.cdc.gov/niosh/face

The National Ag Safety Database: www.cdc.gov/nasd/menu/spanish/english_titles.html

Other resources to check include: local churches and community organizations that serve the Hispanic population; your insurance company (for training programs and/or assistance in Spanish translations); local universities (Spanish departments) and vocational education schools; local safety councils; industry trade associations; and other tree care companies that employ Hispanic workers.