

THE FARMER'S PLIGHT: A LOOK AT THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CANADIAN FARMERS

JC Fresh Farms: Yoga and Meditation for Temporary Foreign Workers

By: Matthew Houston, Canadian Federation of Agriculture

- **Jeremy Capussi runs a greenhouse operation, JC Fresh Farms, growing primarily tomatoes and mini peppers.**
- **Every year Natalie Capussi, Office and Food Safety Control Manager, employs between 85-100 employees based on the season.**
- **Natalie provides her workers with paid yoga and meditation classes, and is unsettled by the backlash she receives online and locally around temporary foreign workers.**

Every year, Natalie Capussi brings in approximately 75 employees from Jamaica, Honduras and Guatemala to assist with the planting, growing and harvesting of her greenhouse operation. These individuals are integral to her operation, with many of them choosing to return to the farm for years on end.

This was the first year where she wasn't sure if she would be able to get them into the country or not.

“We couldn't make any planting reductions as things were already set in motion, but if our workers hadn't come in it would have changed everything. We would have been able to farm maybe less than a third of our acres,” said Natalie.

Every year, Natalie relies on the same team coming to her farm. Out of her 85+ employees this year, only four have never worked on the farm beforehand. Every year, the farm requests these workers by name, and they have the option to accept her invitation.

As part of her farm's employee practices, Natalie's operation pays their employees to take yoga and meditation classes, which have been a huge success with her temporary foreign workers.

“I realized the benefits it brought to my life, and I wanted to bring that into my workforce, especially for the temporary foreign workers because I know it's hard for the guys. You know, they're away from their families and that can get frustrating and stressful. Working in a greenhouse is hard work. If they had a long, hard day I wanted them to have stretches they could use as tools to relieve physical stress,” said Natalie.



A certified yoga instructor conducts a class at JC Fresh Farms

Natalie pays her employees to take the classes on-farm, which they continue to do now, but outside with social distancing. A certified instructor conducts all the sessions.

“These kind of things are mostly new to them, and we've gotten a lot of positive feedback from them, especially the meditation, it's been a wonderful coping mechanism, especially when they are apart from their families,” said Natalie.

With the arrival of COVID-19, Natalie has had to navigate a global health crisis and constantly shifting protocols to try and keep her team safe on the farm. With information constantly evolving, it has not been easy.

“It's been all-hands-on-deck and everybody is trying to navigate through this and organize. But you can't really stay overly organized, because everything is happening so fast. Everything is changing by the day. You're trying to care for these guys the best you can but it's so challenging when there are so many unknown variables,” said Natalie.

“We're in the middle of our busiest time and everything is changing. Every day it's something different. Are we testing or not testing? Are they going to just come and shut us down? Can asymptomatic people work or not? It's constantly changing and nobody really has the right answer. They're constantly shifting the regulations on us. We have been lucky to have assistance from the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers to guide us through every change of direction,” said Natalie.

Even with the difficulties of maintaining her business and the health of her employees during a global pandemic, Natalie says that the most difficult aspect has been the backlash her and her employees receive. Not only online, but locally as well. With the news of outbreaks occurring on other farms in Canada, many people are painting every farm with the same brush and assuming the worst.

“What's most upsetting is the backlash the farming industry has gotten with our temporary foreign workers. People don't understand the reality of what it really is like. The relationships we have with these guys, and their eagerness to be here and the gratitude they have to be on these programs. It's frustrating to see the negative information surrounding them, especially locally. It feels like if they're just going to pin these outbreaks on the temporary foreign workers,” said Natalie.

“I feel like our guys don't understand how this has become about just them. They didn't bring this here. All the outbreaks on farms have been from community transmission. Every worker was quarantined for two weeks,” said Natalie.

“Especially on social media we've seen a lot of backlash. Even people in the community who we felt would have been more supportive. I think it's because everyone is suffering, so they're attacking the whole agriculture community because some workers have tested positive,” said Natalie.



A certified yoga instructor conducts a class at JC Fresh Farms