

Take My Hard Hat...Please!

By Scott Jamieson

The quiet of my holiday weekend at home was broken by the buzz of a chain saw just a few doors down. I knew that sound, someone was getting tree work. As I peered down the block I was disappointed to see it was not one of our trucks working at my neighbor's house. Nope, a renegade crew. No logos on the improvised chipper truck and the chipper sure looked like one of those they carry at the local rental yard.

I looked closely to see if I recognized any of the four crew members – I didn't. None of the crew members had hard hats, hearing protection or eye protection. One man did have safety glasses on but I suspect he was wearing them as sunglasses – they were mirrored and looked really cool.

As I went back to work on my garden I thought about why my neighbor hadn't hired us to do that work. Had we even looked at it for him or were we just thought of as too expensive and exclusive for his small property? Could it be that he was looking for some guys to do the work as cheaply as possible and for cash? I know my neighbor a little bit and the latter is most likely why he had these guys on his property.

"Well, his misfortune," I thought to myself. "I hope those guys screw up his trees." As I pulled more weeds I thought about the total lack of safety just a few doors away.

"Doesn't this homeowner realize the risk? I can guarantee you this renegade crew is not carrying insurance. I would be surprised if they were carrying driver's



licenses! Oh well, this will teach him" I laughed to myself.

Something was eating at me and it wasn't mosquitoes as I tried to go back to work. Then it hit me. I had made a promise to myself that I would not turn my head to unsafe tree work – even if it wasn't one of our teams. A few months ago another neighbor a few blocks away had hired another renegade tree crew to do some work on a Sunday. As I drove by I saw in horror a small boy, no more than 12, picking up branches and hauling them to the chipper while someone was still dropping branches from above. My son was going to be playing baseball, while this little boy might be killed. The image of the young

boy helping his family earn a living while risking his life still sticks with me today. I should not have kept on driving, shaking my head in disbelief and praying that the child did not get hurt while helping his family make some money on a Sunday. I should have stopped and offered to help.

This memory shook me out of my holiday mode and the self-righteousness that often builds in tree people who think we know best and practice our trade with perfection. I couldn't continue with my day and let these four guys risk their lives without saying something. I had to try. I went to my car and pulled out my PPE. In the garage I found an older helmet with outdated logos on it, but still in good shape. As

I walked down the block with my safety gear in hand I wondered what they would say to me and what my escape path would be should they get violent. I haven't practiced Tae Kwon Do in a few years, but I am still pretty fast.

I stood in my neighbor's driveway watching the scene while holding out two hard hats and four pairs of safety glasses, almost like a street vendor looking to sell his wares. When I caught one of their eyes I said "good morning." They spoke good English, smiled and also said good morning. I noticed they were looking directly at the hard hats in my hands.

"Can I offer you some safety protection today? Hard hats and safety glasses?" I asked. One man asked me how much I wanted for them. I told him it was a great deal: free today if he would give them back when finished. He looked surprised but not that puzzled. Another man walked up and said thanks, but "we have all that stuff in the truck."

"It won't do you much good there and I would sure hate to see you lose an eye during this holiday weekend," I replied.

They smiled, said thanks, but insisted that they were OK.

They wouldn't take my stuff but I had accomplished what I had set out to do. I tried and I made the effort to impact this crew's day to make it safer. You can bet they all talked about that interaction later. Maybe I was written off as some kooky guy with a bunch of safety glasses and a couple of hard hats, but maybe somewhere in their heads an idea stuck. Maybe one of them will think twice about putting on PPE.

For me, I learned a lesson that if I am going to make any difference around safety in my company or in our industry I can't do it by wishing or complaining. I must become – as all the leaders in this industry must become – articulate advocates of safety all the time. We must care enough about each other to make that approach and offer a safer alternative.

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There are many miles ahead but it all starts with the belief that we don't have to accept unsafe behaviors and accidents as the normal part of doing business. Tree care can be accomplished without people having to get hurt. We can have a zero-injury culture but we first have to

believe that it is not only right but that it is possible. It all begins with the belief that it is possible. I believe that it is possible.

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