



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Tree farm workers pine for the holidays - On the Job Training

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I think that I shall never feel

Boughs as prickly as a Christmas tree's.

A tree whose em'rald needles pressed

Against my scratched and

now-scarred chest.

A tree who will this season wear

Silv'ry ornaments and lights in her hair

Sports my blood, if anyone cares.

Yes, it's true only God can make a tree

But cutting and netting and tying

Is a chore for lucky fools like me.

- Not Joyce Kilmer

Yes, I said lucky. Sometimes it takes a bit of blood to get into the spirit of things and, well, red and green are the colors of Christmas. That's why I think I was fortunate to get a daylong gig at Medina Christmas Tree Farm last weekend.

Cuyahoga Community College economics professor Charles Reichheld runs the Medina farm he and his brother, Fred, launched nearly three decades ago. "Doc," as Reichheld is known, said he started the farm to teach his four children about business.

If you're looking for a great business model, you won't have to go much beyond this. The farm ([www.medinatrees.com](http://www.medinatrees.com)) annually sells hundreds, maybe thousands of Fraser firs brought in from North Carolina, along with the blue spruce and white and scotch pine grown right there. Just how many is Doc's secret. Ask him and his only answer is, "a lot."

Once the selling season opens the day after Thanksgiving, you'll find as many as 20 young people working there at any given time, cutting trees, hauling trees, wrapping trees, hefting trees, tying trees to cars. Most are former students of Doc's, like my friend Dan Stenger, who hooked me up with this opportunity.

Parma Dan, his given nickname, has been working the farm for almost a dozen years as weekend help. At 29, he's one of the senior statesmen.

At nearly 51, you can believe me when I tell you that cutting, hauling, netting and delivering holiday conifers that can reach up to 20 feet and weigh several hundred pounds is a young man's game.

But sometimes, it's for us sentimental old fogies, too, and here's why:

I loved walking among the trees, smelling the needles and the wood smoke of the fires burning to warm customer and worker alike. The farm itself is a rolling incarnation of a Currier & Ives Christmas card. Majestic blue spruces and Scotch pines scent the air. Fat white pines spread like hooped antebellum skirts. Scraggly seedlings mix amongst their elder brethren, like so many kid brothers tagging along on a date. Hawks soar above the landscape, their white undersides stark and beautiful against the winter sky turned bluer by the cold.

And, as hokey as it sounds, in the air there's a feeling of Christmas.

Let me put it this way: In some ways, the farm is a typical holiday retail business, with a seasonal product. But it's as different from the Christmas sales at a local big box store as that hawk is from a goldfinch. And not just because every now and then, the oinking piglets and honking geese penned next to the wreath barn are interrupted by a distant gunshot.

In the malls or the big-box store, it's about the stress of finding just the right gift for Aunt Martha, whom you never really liked anyway, using moves learned from watching ultimate fighting bouts to secure little Timmy's Roboraptor, or wondering whether your mortgage or your Visa bill will be larger in January. I get a sense that few shoppers really want to be in a store.

But no one goes to a Christmas tree farm unless they really want to go to a Christmas tree farm. People nodded, smiled and said hello to each other. Families and friends spent hours traipsing through the swales of the farm looking for just the right tree. Workers wander through the carefully constructed green maze, offering help and encouragement with equal zeal. That 8-foot spruce? About \$52. Want me to cut it for you? Sure! Want to cut it yourself? Double sure! And whew! But don't tell the boss I said that.

We were all glad to be there - and I'm including the workforce. While the money the folks make at the farm is OK - \$7 or more an hour plus tips (Hint! Hint!) - other factors make it worth sore arms, frozen toes and pine-needle dandruff. My friend Parma Dan is a financial analyst. He doesn't really need the cash. Part of the reason he's here is affection for his old teacher and friend, Doc. But while Dan has never said so in the years I've known him, I think he likes even more the happiness that's more common than snowflakes in January.

Even after just one day, I understand: Instead of coming down the stairs to find one beloved tree on Christmas morning, he's got hundreds. What a wonderful gift.

Plain Dealer reporter Chuck Yarborough is moonlighting at a variety of unusual, scary and dirty jobs. Got something you'd like him to do? Contact him at [cyarborough@plained.com](mailto:cyarborough@plained.com), call 216-999-4534 or write Chuck Yarborough c/o The Plain Dealer, 1801 Superior Ave., Cleveland OH 44114.

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