

Socially-Conscious Flowers: Flowers Help to Support Displaced Colombian Families Through the School of Floriculture

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Feb. 4 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The National Retail Federation estimates more than a third of Americans (35.9 percent) will purchase flowers this year to celebrate Valentine's Day. What many sweethearts may not realize is flower purchases help to support displaced families thousands of miles away. The Colombian Association of Flower Exporters, Asocolflores, supports a program to provide assistance to Colombian families who have been forcefully displaced from their homes.

"As an industry, we are committed to any programs that will help to support the people of our country," said Augusto Solano, President of Asocolflores. "The School of Floriculture gives Colombian families the unique opportunity to earn back their independence and dignity. And flower purchasers help to support this initiative by simply buying and enjoying beautiful flowers."

The School of Floriculture promotes the creation of jobs and allows participants to earn an income and start a new life. Beneficiaries begin the training process and join Asocolflores member companies as apprentices receiving a salary while they train in flower production techniques. After one year, apprentices may choose to accept a permanent job in the company.

With an investment of US \$1.8 million, the School of Floriculture has benefited more than 1,631 families to date. In addition to funding and assistance from Asocolflores and member farms, the program counts on financial and technical support from the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) and financial resources from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Alex Monsalve's Story

Alex Monsalve, once a displaced person, is now a floriculture worker. Alex was able to help his family get ahead in life despite being forced from his home, one of the most difficult situations one can live through as a human being. And just like him, there are thousands of Colombians living in the countryside surrounding big cities such as Bogota, Medellin, Pereira and Cali, who have been able to give their children a future thanks to jobs in the flower industry, one of the agroindustrial sectors offering workers new opportunities.

"In July of 2004, I was displaced by violence from the Department of Antioquia. It was hard to leave behind everything I had worked a lifetime to achieve. Even more so, I have a family and did not know what the future would bring. I arrived at a cousin's house in Madrid, Cundinamarca, in Colombia, with my family, who

a few months before had gone through much of the same experience. Although my cousin offered us help and support, he was just starting to get back on his feet as well."

"In the meantime, I began looking for a job, but my lack of experience in the cultivation of flowers kept me from getting my foot in the door of the floriculture industry. I worked odd jobs, but it was difficult because I was a day worker without a fixed income."

"In November 2004, my cousin mentioned a program that aids families who have been displaced from their homes, the School of Floriculture. It all seemed like a bunch of pipe dreams and idle talk. He told me that a group of people from SENA Human Resources visit the companies to take people under their wing to help them learn and train in their field. The tricky part was getting through the interview. With nothing to lose, I showed up at the appointed hour and took a tough comprehensive test. They talked to me about the Floriculture School, what its mission is, the commitments involved, responsibilities taken and benefits to be had."

"I'm now a floriculture worker in Colombia, the main supplier of fresh-cut flowers to the United States, and one of the most important suppliers to Europe, Russia and Japan. I'm glad to be working in an industry that generates thousands of jobs and offers a positive image of Colombia, a country seeking a new future."

Established in 1973 to represent the interests of the Colombian flower growers in world markets, the Colombian Association of Flower Exporters (Asocolflores) represents more than 70 percent of total Colombian flowers exports. For more information, visit <http://www.asocolflores.org> and <http://www.florverde.org>.

Website: <http://www.asocolflores.org/>

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