

Cultivating Community

*How One NCAE Member
Transformed Tragedy into an
Opportunity to Give Back*

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How we respond in the face of adversity says a lot about who we are, both as people and as organizations. However, turning tragedy into an opportunity to help and support others takes a special vision and collaboration.

When John Derrick, the Vineyard Manager of Mercer Ranches in Prosser, Washington, learned he lost his close friend in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, he was devastated.

John's friend, Richard Guadagno, was one of the heroic passengers of Flight 93. As we know, Flight 93 crashed into the Pennsylvania farmland after passengers thwarted a fourth attack on U.S. soil—one that likely was meant to destroy the United States Capitol.

John knew he needed to do something to honor his friend and the others lost in the 9/11 attacks. "To me," John explained, "to be able to tell this story of



Above: Rob Mercer (left) and John Derrick (right) displaying a bottle of Mercer Ranches' charitable wine.

Flight 93 was important." For John, however, the path forward was not so clear. "I always questioned how I was going to end up helping."

Rob Mercer, President of Mercer Ranches, previously served as a Captain in the U.S. Marine Corps and reenlisted to serve in Iraq in 2007-2008. When he returned to Mercer Ranches, John approached him with this desire to honor the memory of his friend. Rob and John discussed opportunities to commemorate those lives lost and the role that Mercer Ranches could play.

Ultimately, the vision to plant a memorial block of their vineyard, Block 93, came to fruition.

With the concept of Block 93 fresh in their minds, John and Rob began to work. Ground preparation of the one-acre lot that would become Block 93 began in the Horse Heaven Hills in 2009. In 2010, they planted 911 vines of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes earmarked for use in a premium wine. Members of Mercer Ranches and the surrounding community volunteered to plant the last 40 vines—representing the 40 passengers and crew lost on Flight 93—by hand.

What began as a personal memorial quickly evolved. "It is a super powerful idea," John said, "that came out of talking about something that I wanted and needed—and something that Rob wanted and needed as well."

John credits Rob's vision and leadership for turning Block 93 into a charity. Rob, he explained, saw Block 93 as a way to turn the tragedy of 9/11 into an opportunity for Mercer Ranches to give back to the community.

All proceeds of Block 93 are donated to charitable organizations such as Children of Fallen Patriots Foundation, Semper Fi Fund, and Friends of Flight 93. Mercer also donates bottles of Block 93 to other organizations, including the Flight 93 Memorial in Stoystown, Pennsylvania, which are then able to leverage the wine to raise money for their own causes.

Since starting Block 93, John explained, "we have donated over a quarter of a million dollars."

"To me," John explained, "to be able to tell this story of Flight 93 was important."

Beyond the direct impact Block 93 makes as a charity, it also provides Mercer Ranches an opportunity to build bridges with the surrounding community. As a large farm, and particularly one that is associated with a winery, there are a lot of tours involved. "Getting that chance to get one-on-one time [with visitors] is powerful," he added.

Visitors are often unaware of the path food takes to get to the plate, and may even have negative preconceptions about agriculture. John explained that Block 93 gives him the opportunity to "share and say I am just as human as you are and we really [have] quite a bit in common... [E]veryone knows where they were [on 9/11], what they were doing, and how it impacted them—directly or indirectly."

As a result, he added, visitors have told him "they appreciate what we are doing and that we are telling the story."



Above: Block 93 sits along the picturesque Horse Heaven Hills in Prosser, Washington.



Left: John Derrick's friend, Richard Guadagno, and his beloved dog, Raven. Richard was one of the heroic passengers lost on Flight 93 on September 11, 2001.

Below: New grape growth on one of the vines in Block 93.



This bridge works both ways, he added. "I have gotten to hear their stories as well."

Block 93 is a crown jewel for Mercer Ranches and exemplifies the good that the agricultural community can do. For other agricultural employers looking for their own charitable opportunity, John has some advice.

"I think the need is out there for everyone to get more involved with the community," he explained. "No matter your idea or how you connect, there is somebody that wants to connect with you as well and has that same need. Take your ideas and run with them—they will find traction."

Telling one's story can have a tremendous impact on changing minds about what agriculture is. As John said, "we know what we know—getting to share allows us to find commonality."



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