



Life after Cherry Blossom layoffs

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WILLIAMSBURG -- Benito Vasquez Jr. dedicated nine years of life and labor to Chris and Janet Hubbell's fruit processing operation, Cherry Blossom LLC.

His reward: The Hubbells stiffed him for four weeks' pay and Vasquez's bank sued when his Cherry Blossom-issued paycheck bounced.

"There really isn't much to say; I lost my job, I lost my car and I'm about to lose my home," Vasquez said.

At least 25 people found themselves without work on June 1, when Cherry Blossom closed its plant in northern Grand Traverse County.

"I'm not the only business to ever close, the only business to put people in hardship," Chris Hubbell said.

Several former employees disagree and said they're bitter that Hubbell thrust them into financial chaos with bounced paychecks and empty promises. They also contend Hubbell improperly diverted money they paid for health insurance and child support payments, among other deductions.

"If they had been straight-up honest a couple of months ago, at least we could have been prepared," said Vasquez, who worked as a shift supervisor. "I've got kids and a wife to take care of."

Repeatedly sued

Creditors repeatedly sued Cherry Blossom and its forerunner, Williamsburg Receiving and Storage, over the past decade, acts that prompted Hubbell to reorganize on several occasions to keep his processing plant afloat.

But Hubbell began to lay off employees last November, and nearly cut his workforce in half. More trouble arose this year, on May 27, when employees were due to receive pay for the first two weeks of May.

That was a Wednesday, and Hubbell withheld paychecks until that Friday. He told employees there'd be enough money in the bank by Monday to cover them.

Vasquez deposited his paycheck over the weekend. It bounced, and the bank sued him in small claims court.

"I know people who have written bad checks and they sit in jail for two-to-three years," Vasquez said. "What I never understood was why I was going to court over a check (the Hubbells) wrote."

Lisa Chenard worked as the Hubbells' accounting supervisor until March, when she left for another job. She

spent much of her time putting off creditors and vendors because Cherry Blossom couldn't pay them, but said the final straw came when Chris Hubbell purchased a late-model tractor-semi trailer, though the company already owned more trucks than it could use.

Such business decisions made it easy to leave Cherry Blossom, Chenard said.

"I really liked Chris and Janet; they had really big hearts. It just seems they kind of gave up towards the end," Chenard said. "I think they just quit caring about the employees."

'Don't know where to go'

Aurora and Teodoro Bernal and their five children left Texas in March for jobs at Cherry Blossom.

Aurora Bernal's brother is Benito Vasquez Sr., who like his son was a supervisor at Cherry Blossom. Vasquez offered his Texas kin full-time employment, plus summer jobs for their two teenage children. The Hubbells threw in free lodging in one of four mobile homes they owned and kept behind the Williamsburg plant.

"It was a good deal, and we were going to be four working instead of one working," Aurora Bernal said.

They had no idea Cherry Blossom was about to go under.

"(Chris Hubbell) never gave us any indication. He didn't want to tell us," Aurora Bernal said. "If he had given us enough time, we would have made different plans, tried to save us some money."

Without jobs, they almost became homeless. Chris Hubbell scheduled an auction for Aug. 27, and included four mobile homes for sale. He stopped by the Bernals' trailer shortly before the auction and announced they had 10 days to move.

The Bernals instead contacted Farmworker Legal Services of Michigan, whose officials told Hubbell he couldn't evict the family without written notice.

Without the money Hubbell owes them -- about \$1,200 -- the Bernals couldn't afford to make the first month's rent and security deposit elsewhere. And they couldn't get financial help from area human service agencies to cover the deposit without an eviction notice.

Aurora Bernal said she had to turn to family members in Texas for money to help buy food and pay for utilities.

"The kids, you know how they are, they ask for things, and it's hard ... and school is starting," she said. "We weren't rich in Texas, but we were making it. Here we don't know anyone, don't know how things work, don't know where to go."

'I don't have that money'

Benito Vasquez Sr. and his wife Linda spent a decade laboring for the Hubbells. Linda cashed their last paycheck at Wal-Mart, so unlike their son, they lost two weeks' pay each, almost \$3,000 together. But their daughter had surgery in early May, and they were saddled with \$2,000 in medical bills. The Hubbells canceled their employees' medical insurance May 1, but didn't tell them, the employees said.

"Janet (Hubbell) knew my daughter was going for surgery and wished me luck and everything, and we thought we had it paid by insurance," Linda Vasquez said. "I don't have that money."

And she doesn't know what happened to the \$87 the Hubbells withheld from each May paycheck for health

insurance premiums.

Chris Hubbell said Cherry Blossom paid for health insurance a month in advance, and collected payments from workers during the month of coverage.

"I don't like what happened and stuff, but I didn't have any choice," Hubbell said. "I lost my health insurance, too."

Workers said the bounced May paychecks continued to show a deduction for health insurance, though it already had been canceled.

Paul Henigan dealt with similar problems. He began work at Cherry Blossom in April and said the Hubbells garnished more than \$1,100 in child support payments intended for his young son. But money from his checks never made it to child support coffers, Henigan said.

"They didn't pay any of the child support throughout the whole time I worked for them," Henigan said. "They stole \$1,100 from my son."

Henigan said his son's mother recently told him Cherry Blossom eventually sent a check for about half of the child support owed. He doesn't know if they'll see the rest. He's still repaying his bank to cover the May paycheck from Cherry Blossom that bounced, and he only recently landed a minimum-wage job.

"Money is kind of hard to come by right now," Henigan said.

Some relief

Cherry Blossom workers lost their jobs three months ago, and most had given up hope of seeing their back pay. Then a surprise: The U.S. Department of Labor recently announced it had their wages.

A Cherry Blossom customer, Sensient Flavors LLC, of Indianapolis, agreed to cover the full \$38,700 unpaid payroll for Cherry Blossom workers. Sensient could not sell cherries processed by Cherry Blossom in May and shipped to Sensient unless the workers were paid, based on federal labor laws.

"That's just wonderful news. Now we'll be able to move," said Aurora Bernal. Her husband was hired at Burnette Foods Inc. in Elk Rapids and she recently took a part-time job as a housekeeper for a hotel.

"It's not much, but it's something, and I was able to buy some clothes for the kids to start school," Aurora said. "Things are a lot better now."

Burnette Foods also hired Benito Vasquez Sr. and his son, but the elder Vasquez said he knows of at least nine former co-workers who remain unemployed.

And his family continues to struggle from the setback.

"We're facing a lot of stuff, facing foreclosure, but we're working with the banks right now and I hope we can come out of this. I think we will," he said.

Hard feelings remain, however.

"He (Chris Hubbell) is driving around in his truck like nothing happened, but you can't cover the sun with your fingers," Vasquez Sr. said. "It's not that we wish anything bad for him, but when you do bad things to people, it will catch up to you."

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Photos



Benito Vasquez Jr., with son Benito III, 2, worked at Cherry Blossom LLC for nine years before the processing plant closed last June. Record-Eagle