

# Focused on the future

Winning a top health and safety award is great, but it's what comes next that really matters, Danny Arbuckle of Ribbonwood Yarding Systems tells **JACKIE BROWN-HAYSOM**.



Jackie Brown-Haysom

**W**hen a ten-member forest crew from Kaingaroa takes top place in the NZ Workplace Health & Safety Awards ahead of companies with full time OHS teams and large budgets, one might expect them to be a little overwhelmed. But while *Danny and Janine Arbuckle*, directors of *Ribbonwood Yarding Systems*, are very happy about their crew's success, they reckon their guys deserve it.

"At the awards dinner I was listening to what the other finalists had been doing and I'd lean across to Phil [crew OHS coordinator, *Phil Jennings*] and say: 'We've done

that,'" says Danny, quietly proud that his team has beaten much bigger players at their own game.

But if the Arbuckles are pleased with RYS's success, they're anything but complacent. They see the win – one of a growing number of accolades collected by the crew following Jennings' win in the most influential employee category at last year's NZ Workplace Health & Safety Awards – not so much as an achievement as a challenge.

"We won't stop here," Danny says. "I know the guys will already be asking themselves, where to next? They'll all keep their heads – they know how hard it is to achieve what we've achieved, but they also know it's not the finish.

"You have to keep moving forward with health and safety. If you stop looking ahead you start stagnating."

## Influencing attitudes

Danny started work in the forest 20 years ago. Over several years he worked his way up from a skid worker to a faller, getting to know every aspect of the job on the way. He worked for a number of crews and learned a lot – both good and bad – about the way bosses' attitudes can influence on-site behaviour. When he and Janine bought their first contracting crew eight years ago, he determined to pass on the best bits of these experiences.

"If, as a boss, you want to be treated as an idiot, treat your employees the same way," he says. "I've always treated my guys how I want to be treated, and that brings them on board so we can all move forward together.

"It's a dangerous job, and you can't afford to walk away when you know only half the guys are committed to the crew."

## Looking after the team

As Danny and Janine see it, the best way to foster a healthy team spirit is to take good care of the team members. For the RYS crew this means each day starts with a drive into the forest in a double-cab Toyota Hilux, rather than the well-worn buses and vans favoured by other crews.

"You can't do anything unless the guys are on board one hundred percent," Danny says. "Going to work in a nice vehicle changes the mood. And we've given all our guys high-viz t-shirts, bush singlets, and jackets with the company logo on them, because it helps them feel part of a team. When we go to events with other contractors they feel proud to be the only ones with their own t-shirts."

While work starts on the skid sites at 7 each morning, Arbuckle crews are paid from 6.30am to ensure they arrive on site early and are well prepared before they pick up their chainsaws.

"I've done it for years because I don't want them coming on site and rushing around. If they don't have time to get things done properly before they go out on the job, sooner or later something will go wrong and there'll be an accident."

## Bad beginnings

These days the couple have three contracting crews and have recently won a tender to set up a new one. With almost parental impartiality, they refute suggestions that RYS is the pick of the bunch, insisting their teams are equally good, and pointing to a hauler of the year trophy recently awarded to one of the others.

They do admit, however, that RYS has had its share of problems. When they bought it as going concern some two years ago, many in the industry must have thought them mad. The crew's appalling OHS record had prompted a letter from forest owners Kaingaroa Timberlands warning that there would be no more work after the end of the year.

"It was a big exercise to see if we could change things around and get them on board with the way we think," Danny acknowledges. "But I talked to a couple of the guys after the first month and they said it was a real joy for them to come to work now, whereas before it had been a case of 'what time do we go home?'"

## Awards and accolades

As he tells it, the turnaround, in both attitude and performance, sounds almost miraculous. He takes little of the credit, however, simply saying that when he told them what he expected and what his other crews were achieving, they listened.

Whatever the reason for the crew's changed behaviour, the results speak for themselves. Before the year was out RYS had an award for the most improved OHS performance in the Kaingaroa Forest and, a month after Phil Jennings' success in the 2006 NZ Workplace Health & Safety Awards, it took the trophy

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**DAVID BALFOUR, DIRECTOR, TIMBERLANDS KAINGAROA.**

for Harvesting Training Company of the Year at the FITEC awards.

At the time of going to press it was again a nominee for a FITEC award, this time as the company with the year's best OHS performance, and its winning entry for the 2007 Workplace awards was accompanied by letters of glowing endorsement from representatives of the same forest owners who previously sought to close it down.

## Focus on fatalities

Danny is still excited by the transformation.

"The guy who owned it before didn't realise what he had. They're one of the best crews you could ever have because they're so motivated."

This high level of motivation was at the heart of the crew's award winning initiatives [see sidebar]. The faller safety management system evolved over ten months of trial and error, while the DVD project began with a chance comment at a tail gate meeting and grew slowly over eight months, with everyone contributing ideas and suggestions.

"Last year was a bad year with quite a lot of deaths in the industry, and the guys got talking about the deaths at one of the tail gate meetings," Danny says,

"A couple of the guys said they were thinking about making a video and asked what did I think, so I said I'd bring the camera out and we'd give it a go."

The initial idea was to make a simple home video, mimicking a television drink-driving campaign advertisement, and cautioning about the dangers of working in the forest when under emotional strain. Danny, however, discussed the idea with FITEC, the forest industry training organisation, and re-

ceived an offer of both funding and technical assistance. ACC also put up \$3000 towards production and distribution costs, and Timberlands director *David Balfour* agreed to provide an introductory comment.

## Dealing with distress

The RYS team went to work on the script, settling on a format showing two possible outcomes to a situation in which a crew member comes to work after a bitter row with his wife. In the first, his mates and boss dismiss his obvious distress and put him to work as a feller. With his mind not on the job, he suffers a fatal accident.

In the second scenario, however, his crew boss and workmates realise he is under strain, take responsibility for looking after him, and assign him to a less risky task for the day.

This caring ethos may seem at odds with the perceived macho nature of forest crews, but for Danny it is the way he has always done things. He keeps in daily contact with all his crews, clocking up 100,000 km a year in the process, and sees morning tail gate meetings as an opportunity to keep an eye out for anyone who may be having issues.

"I can always tell if someone's not paying attention or if they've got something they want to talk about and will make time to have a chat with them afterwards," he says. "You never know what they're going to tell you – something to do with the job, or home, or whatever – but they've got to be able to do it."

"The guys know they can talk to me about anything, and if we can do something to help, we will."

"It affects the whole crew if something's going on, so it's too important to ignore." ■

## What they did:

Ribbonwood Yarding Systems' entry, which won both the NZ Safety award for best initiative to promote or communicate an improved safety culture and the Air New Zealand award for best overall contribution to improving workplace health and safety in NZ 2007, was based on a series of initiatives to improve safety for logging crew fallers.

The team developed a call-in system, under which fallers are required to make radio contact with a designated team member every half hour, with procedures in place for quick follow up of missed calls; a faller log book which prompts workers to self-assess their physical and emotional preparedness for work and record hazards encountered on the job; and a radio panic alarm, with which to summon immediate help in an emergency.

It also devised, scripted, and acted in a DVD highlighting the need to be aware of crew members who may be under emotional strain and to avoid putting them in high risk work situations. Forest industry trainer, FITEC, intends to distribute the DVD to the industry and to screen it at safety gatherings.