
Soquel flower farmer returns to the fields after tumor scare

SOQUEL - Over the last couple of years, 58-year-old Richard Thomsen had come to learn the signs of an impending seizure, so he knew what was coming on the morning of Jan. 13.

Around 8 a.m., he'd just turned onto Cherryvale Avenue in Soquel when he suddenly realized his vision was fading. Knowing a full-blown seizure was imminent, he coasted to the side of the road - and the next thing he remembered, sirens were wailing in the distance.

Soon after, he underwent a CAT scan at Regional Medical Center in San Jose, and learned a grapefruit-sized tumor was inside his skull. "The doctor said, 'Don't blame yourself, it's nothing you did. You were born with it and about five years ago, it decided to take off and grow,'" Thomsen recalled. The tumor, which turned out to be benign, was removed several days later.

Thomsen's now back to tending to the narcissus, gladiolus, sunflowers and other flowers he grows on eight acres of land that he leases from his lifelong friend, Jim Hobbs. However, to prevent a build-up of pressure on his still-healing skull, he can't lift anything for several weeks, and he can't drive for several months. Thomsen said his coordination's fine, and his doctors doubt he'll suffer any long-term effects from the tumor, meaning he'll soon be able to return to his normal activities.

"The doctor told me yesterday when we had our follow-up appointment, all things considered, it worked out really well," he said Friday. "This could have been cancer. Cancer, why, you can just figure you're going to buy the farm at that point."

Physically, Thomsen said he feels fine. But with low-priced competitors from overseas growers cutting into his profits, the knowledge that a medical bill in the tens of thousands of dollars is headed his way weighs heavily on his mind. Asked whether he has health insurance, he shook his head no.

"It's my own fault, because I figured I'd make it until Medicare kicked in," he said, standing next to several neatly kept rows of bright yellow narcissus flowers. "But you never know when something's going to strike you. My body's always been bullet proof, but in this case, I didn't make it."

To help cover those costs, Hobbs recently set up a fund so community members can donate. Meanwhile, he said, friends and neighbors have been coming to the farm to help out, mostly by peeling the thin skins off dozens of tulip bulbs.

Hobbs opens a door at the side of the shed, inside of which sit dozens of black crates, each containing about 550 bulbs. They all must be peeled and planted sometime in the next month, Thomsen said, to produce a viable yield.

"Out here, our houses are so spread out that we don't get to talk a lot," Hobbs said. "But since we've gotten together to help Rich out, it's got people out and talking to each other. So it's been kind of a nice little get-together thing for the neighborhood."

RICHARD THOMSEN MEDICAL RELIEF FUND

To make a donation, make a check payable to:
Richard Thomsen Medical Relief Fund
P.O. Box 142
Soquel, CA 95073