

Contained chaos at Waterford florist on the eve of Valentine's Day



BUY PHOTO

Nancy Hummel assembles single-rose vases at Hoelck's Florist in Waterford as staff prepare orders for Valentine's Day Monday, February 13 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

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Waterford — The calls started coming in just before 9 a.m.

“Hoelck’s Florist and Bouquets of Fruit, how can I help you?” Michael Hoelck answered by pressing a button on the wireless headset, which had already been sitting over his ear for a few hours.

Hoelck glanced back at his wife, Victoria, who was arranging baby’s breath around roses in a vase behind him.

“Is this for the holiday?” he asked into the phone.

He already knew the answer.

Hoelck and the rest of the staff at the Boston Post Road florist have been preparing for Tuesday's flower-and-chocolate rush for more than a month. A big calendar on the wall was flipped to a picture of a huge bouquet of roses for February, as if they could forget. Around Christmastime, Hoelck had ordered more than 1,500 red roses and another 1,000 roses of other colors.

And the day was finally almost here. The cooler by the register was pre-stocked with vases and bouquets for walk-in customers. Delivery staff, including an additional four or five drivers hired just for the holiday, wandered in and out of the warehouse, checking delivery details and planning their routes.

Other employees quietly got started on assembling the dozens of bouquets they would have to finish before Tuesday morning.



Lauren Dziengielewski adds a mylar balloon to a vase of flowers as Mark Gallerani, back, waits as staff at Hoelck's Florist in Waterford prepare orders for Valentine's Day Monday, February 13 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Hoelck puzzled over whether a driver would be able to get into Electric Boat's New London facility. He had two orders there, and getting past the security gate had posed problems in the past.

Then, a driver on a less romantic mission — delivering a stop sign-sized arrangement to a New London funeral home — called in. He was lost. Hoelck gave him directions, then put down the phone. It rang again, with a customer on the other end trying to resolve a mixed up credit card transaction.

"I'd pull out my hair," Hoelck said, once the issue was sorted out. "But I don't have any hair to pull out."

On a shelf behind him, pink roses sat destined for a teacher at Cutler Middle School and a bouquet of mixed flowers with a big pink ribbon for someone named Joanne in New London. The drivers gingerly moved each bouquet and arrangement into their trucks and set out on their second or third trips of the day.

Many of Tuesday's delivery orders would be finished Monday, and then the Hoelck's staff would brace themselves for a deluge on Tuesday morning. Hoelck said he's been in the business for more than 30 years, 12 of them with Victoria in Waterford.

"There's never enough hours in the day when it comes to the holidays," he said.



BUY PHOTO

Driver Rick Silva secures arrangements in his delivery truck before departing Hoelck's Florist in Waterford with orders for Valentine's Day Monday, February 13 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Sometimes, Hoelck said, people don't remember it's Valentine's Day until their coworkers start getting flower deliveries at work around them.

"People go 'Oh, it's Valentine's Day', and they start calling, because they forgot their wife," he said. "It happens all the time."

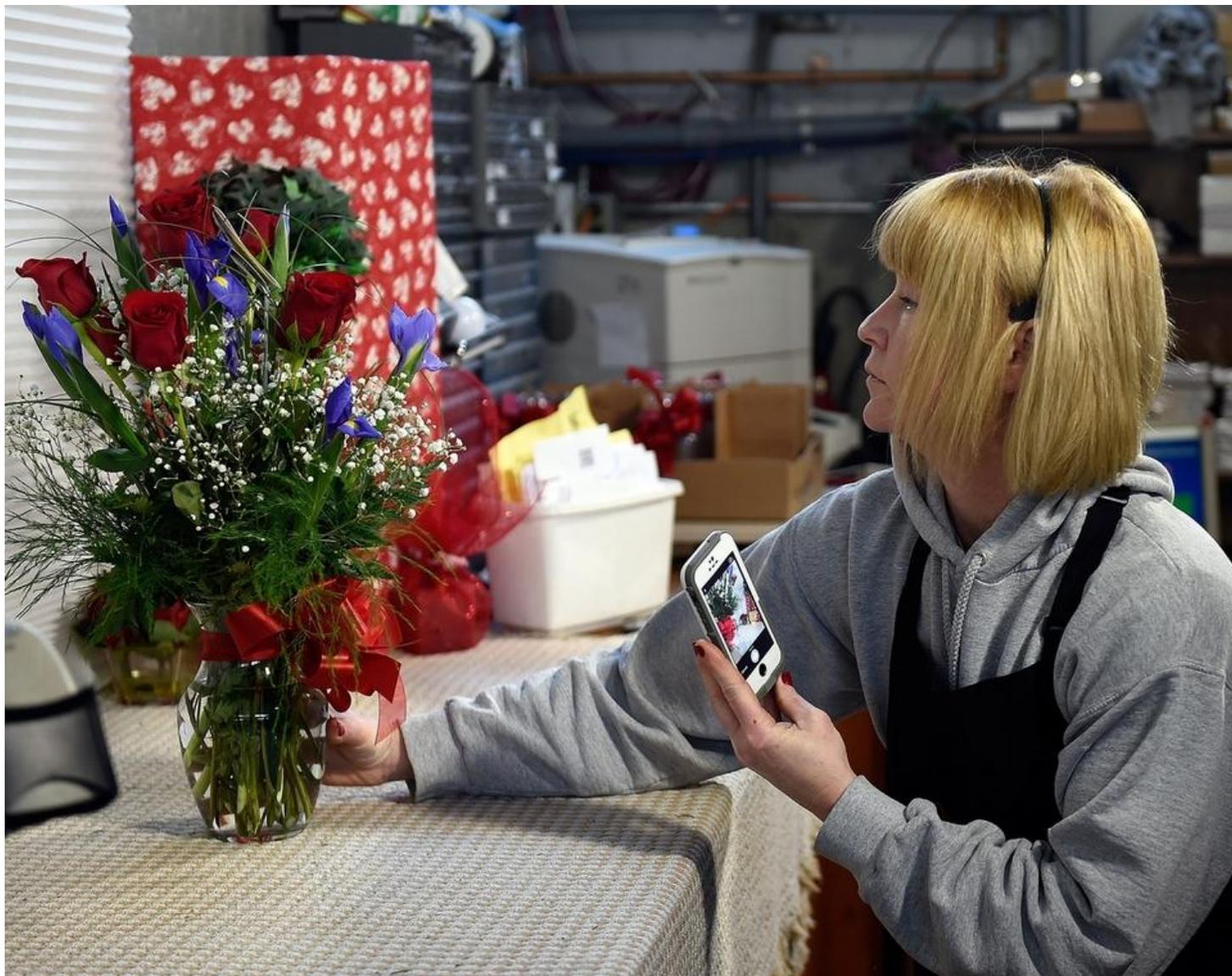
The florist does a small percent of its orders online, and Hoelck said that part of the business is growing. He will also pick up some of the last-minute calls from national merchants who rely on local shops to fill orders they can't fill themselves.

Hoelck held out a cardboard box that had a small pile of printed-out orders for flowers that would need delivering on Tuesday.

"This just keeps growing all day long, it's crazy," he said.

And those calls will be coming in clear through Wednesday, Hoelck said, from 40, 50 or even up to 60 Valentines who let holiday slip their minds and need a belated bunch of roses.

"We hardly ever say no," he said.



BUY PHOTO

Ayreka Buonanno places an arrangement in front of a background to be photographed as staff at Hoelck's Florist in Waterford prepare orders for Valentine's Day Monday, February 13 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Hoelck has a piece of advice for people who call him, frantic, on the day after the holiday to place an order.

"You say, 'every day is Valentine's Day with you, honey,'" he said with a chuckle.

The Hoelck's staff had varying levels of enthusiasm for one of their busiest days of the year.

Nancy Hummel, who was busy Monday morning filling vases with individual roses for sale at local hospitals Tuesday, said she's been working in the flower industry since 1978, enough for almost forty Valentine's Days.

"It's not my favorite," she said. "But it comes with the territory."

Cathy Griswold, who grew up in a family of florists in Danielson, feels a little differently. She laughed at Hummel's reaction, poking a red carnation into a small vase for emphasis.



BUY PHOTO

Sue Hauser, front, and Alicia Gentile assemble fruit bouquets at Hoelck's Florist in Waterford as staff prepare orders for Valentine's Day Monday, February 13 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

“I would love flowers at my house, anytime someone wants to give them to me,” she said.

On the other side of Hoelck’s, Alicia Gentile was arranging fruit, not flowers, into bunches. The store finished an expansion of the shop in 2008 and added fresh fruit (<http://www.theday.com/article/20141008/BIZ02/141009664/0/search>) bouquets and chocolate-dipped fruit to their product line in 2014.

Gentile said she was grateful for the blustery but warm weather forecast this week. Last year, she said, the flowers were freezing and wilting before they could even get out the door.

“Even to get them from the door to the van, it was so cold,” she said.

The store just had to make it until Wednesday, poking as many pieces of pineapple onto sticks and arranging as many roses into big bunches of twelve as they could, as quickly as possible.

“Then we’ll be good until Mother’s Day,” Gentile said.

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