Florence Hardwoods Speaks Out
Regarding OSHA Investigation and Fine
The following is a statement from Florence Hardwoods:

On December 18, 2023, Florence Hardwoods received notification from OSHA that it was being cited for more than 40 alleged violations of safety regulations, with assessed penalties totaling close to $1.4 Million Dollars. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) subsequently issued a news release on December 19 that mischaracterized the events that occurred at Florence Hardwoods, as well as lacked pertinent information.

Out of respect for the family of Michael Schuls, Florence Hardwoods has remained quiet over the past six months and intentionally chose to not respond publicly about the DOL’s investigations and former statements to the press regarding the June 29, 2023 incident. However, various allegations that the DOL made in its December 19 press release have no merit and we were left with no choice but to respond publicly.

Florence Hardwoods disagrees with the DOL’s characterization that it allowed minors to operate dangerous machinery and perform maintenance on equipment without training on safety procedures. At no time did we intentionally put minors in harms’ way. Florence Hardwoods worked closely with the local high school to provide opportunities for students, including work programs that were sought out by the high school. The DOL has chosen to disregard the fact that several of our youth workers were associated with what we believed were formal apprenticeship programs through the State and local high school, as well as internships and “school to work” programs set up with the local high school and Sherriff’s Department.

Contrary to the opinions cited by the DOL, Florence Hardwoods has high regard for all of our workers. The loss of Michael Schuls will remain with us forever. His death is not due to reckless and illegal behavior. The State of Wisconsin allows minors to be employed in a planing-mill department, as do the federal regulations. Michael and the other youth employees worked in the planing-mill. In addition, Michael was issued a work permit allowing him to work at Florence Hardwoods in the planing-mill. Although the state and federal regulations allow for minors to perform work in planing mills and maintenance shops, the DOL treated the entirety of Florence Hardwoods’ operations as a sawmill; they ignored the fact that the truck maintenance shop and planing-mill operations are in separate buildings, separate and distinct from the sawmill.

We also believe it is important to note that a substantial number of the alleged violations noted in the citations are not related to the work performed by minors, as suggested by DOL’s press release. Also, contrary to the DOL’s assertions, our youth workers and adult workers did receive safety and lockout/tagout training. (more)
It is also our opinion that the reference to Minerick Logging and Sagola Hardwoods was inappropriate. They are two separate companies, located in a different state and with different management. Neither of those entities have ever employed minors at their facilities.

Florence Hardwoods may have made mistakes, but we did not willfully nor deliberately violate any rules or regulations. We will move forward with the OSHA abatement process and address any deficiencies in our safety program, but we will not accept what we consider to be unfair and politically motivated actions on the part of the DOL.

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No additional statements will be made. Interviews are not available.

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