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From produce to dairy to equine, farm workers are an overlooked force powering Hudson Valley agriculture.

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In the hallway of the Warwick Area Migrant Committee, a squad of kids — about 7 to 11 years old — shout, laugh, and cause an all-around ruckus. They are not shy. In fact, their casual goofing around has escalated into an unofficial dance-off of moves they learned on the video game Fortnite: One of them flosses, while his friend dabs. This goes back and forth for a while and ends with some kind of lawn sprinkler/pogo-stick number that would earn them a trophy on *So You Think You Can Dance?*

In the room just down the hallway, bilingual staff helps their parents — some of whom are undocumented immigrants — complete paperwork so they can attend Dulce Esperanza, a summer camp for the children of farm workers hosted by the Warwick Area Migrant Committee (WAMC). For just 10 percent of the program's cost, parents can send their children to camp at Pine Island School for seven weeks. Campers get the chance to cook, play music, dance (obviously), learn about computers and robotics, garden, and participate in field trips to destinations like a martial arts academy, a county fair, or a Hudson Valley Renegades baseball game. Behind this slew of activities is Kathy Brieger, executive director of the WAMC.

Brieger, who has the disposition of a neighborhood mom and the delegation skills of a Hollywood director, has been assisting farm workers since she was 17 years old. Although her background is in nutrition, her passion has been for serving workers and their families. She began as an advocate, working with the Social Action Committee of her local church, but eventually made her way to the Center, where politics don't get in the way of helping out.

A farm worker at his home on the farm; *(right)* Dulce Esperanza campers take field trips full of experiential learning.

For most of the year — including orientation day of the camp — the WAMC operates out of the HRHCare-Alamo Community Center, a partner organization and sister to the neighboring health center. Together, these organizations provide a number of year-round activities and services for local children and their families, including homework club, sewing club, Girls on the Run, a hot meal program in winter, clothing donations, and a food pantry.

These kinds of support services are partly what attract farm workers to New York State, according to Chris Pawelski, a fourth-generation onion farmer in Goshen. The New York Farm Bureau has lobbied for continuous funding for these programs in order to stave off labor shortages, which have been a problem for decades.

Dulce Esperanza, Spanish for "sweet hope," was named so by the parents of the campers. "Often these kids are really the outsiders," says Brieger. "They speak English, but their parents don't, so they don't have a sense of belonging."

Aside from connecting children with their peers through activities, Dulce Esperanza serves breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack, providing a grand total of 9,400 meals throughout the summer.

"These kids are hungry," says Brieger. "It's kind of ironic, isn't it? Their parents are out feeding us."

For all the emphasis on sustainability over the past two decades, for all of the fanaticism over farm-to-table cuisine in the media, the stories of farm workers have been omitted from the narrative of our food supply. In the late '80s, the population began to change from black workers to those of Hispanic origin. The vast majority, ranging from 57 to 68 percent according to different sources, are Mexican. Recent decades have seen farmers finally receiving some of the credit and attention they deserve, but approximately 37 percent of farms in the Hudson Valley employ outside workers. As one farm worker put it during a conference on food justice and labor issues at Mohonk Mountain House last fall: "Without us there would be no vegetables, no fruit — and no wine!"

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Because of the structure of the food industry, consumers have grown used to fixed food prices. As Dr. Margaret Gray, a professor at Adelphi University and author of *Labor and the Locavore: The Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic*, explains, agriculture does not operate like conventional industries. "Most farms lose money and the U.S. government compensates for these losses through heavy subsidies, providing between one-quarter and one-half of farms' net income."

Pawelski says that while operation costs have increased, prices have remained stagnant. In 1983 he got $6 for a 50-lb bag of yellow onions; in the last few years, he has sold a good portion of his inventory for $8 per bag.

In this way, the U.S. farm industry has relied on cheap labor for virtually its entire history. Until recently, this meant New York State farm workers did not receive overtime, a day of rest, or collective bargaining rights. In July, Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed a bill establishing the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act (S6578), granting these rights to workers.

One husband and wife, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told us about their lives working on an onion farm. In 2004, they came to the U.S. from Puebla, a province in Mexico, and worked in Los Angeles before making their way to New York to join some family in the area.

The pair now has three children, the most recent of whom was born in February. Because of the growing season, which starts in April and runs into January, they had to return to work when their newborn was just one month old.

"We wake up at six and get the kids ready, go to babysitting or to school, and by seven we start working," she says. "We work into the afternoon because we don't have a lunch hour. We work on a contract."

"We're paid by the plant, not by the hour," adds her husband.

"I have a different schedule than he does because I have to take care of the kids. So I leave, but he might get up at five in the morning and work until eight at night."

As for the work, it is unforgiving on the body: much of their day is spent bent over, handling plants in ways that machines cannot. The heat can be brutal, sometimes

MIGRANT COMMITTEE — KATHY BRIEGER

Most farm workers arrive in the United States thinking their stay will be temporary, but circumstances often lead to extended stays or an unknown return date.

reaching 100 degrees. Working in close quarters with chemicals and pesticides seven days per week worries them as well.

The family lives on the farm year round. They are grateful to have their living quarters provided, and describe their boss as reasonable. But for the husband and wife, one of the hardest parts of living as undocumented farm workers is being stranded in the United States.

"There are people who can travel, who can go and visit their families, but we can't do that," she says. "So it's sad. Sometimes we have family members who get sick, and we can't go visit them."

As immigrants, home is never far from mind. Both Pawelski and Gray agree that most farm workers think their stay in the U.S. is temporary; the goal is to eventually return home. But as Gray puts it, for one reason or another, many end up staying: "Some get hooked on footing just one more bill, such as for medical expenses, schooling, or home improvement projects; others plan to save a larger nest egg; and some cite the improved opportunities for their U.S.-based children or pressure from their kids as a reason to stay."

In the last two decades, migration — traveling for seasonal employment — has declined among farm workers by almost 60 percent. This is due in part to an aging workforce, and the changes that accompany such a transition. For instance, as farm workers marry or have families, they become less willing to migrate. Stricter U.S. laws and policies following 9/11 also made border crossings more difficult and dangerous. Still, the USDA Economic Research Service reports that roughly half of all farm workers are undocumented, while less than a quarter are legally authorized to be in the country. Thirty-two percent were born in the U.S.

In order to employ workers legally, farmers must hire U.S. residents or temporary foreign workers under the H-2A visa program. To hire guest workers through H-2A, farmers must pay for their workers' transportation to and from their home countries; compensate them at a higher rate than minimum wage; adhere to stringent housing requirements; follow additional policies and procedures; and file paperwork that is so complicated, many farmers hire an outside agency to complete it.

"Cumbersome" is how the American Farm Bureau Federation describes the H-2A program. "The reality is that a majority of farm workers are in the U.S. illegally, largely because Congress has ignored the shortcomings of the existing agricultural worker program," reads a statement on their website.

Pawelski and his wife, Eve, developed a proposal to reform the visa and immigration system through their agricultural advocacy organization, Farmroot. In short, their reform did away with the H-2A program in favor of a two-track visa system: a seasonal visa would grant workers residency for up to 10 months with a simple reapplication process, while a year-round visa would lead to adjusted status after five years, so long as specific criteria were met.

"For those that want it — for those that have families that are here, those that have children — citizenship should be made available," says Pawelski. "And those that don't want it, then it should be made available that they can go back and forth without having to be U.S. citizens."

Labor shortages have been a problem in New York agriculture industry due to its distance from the U.S.-Mexico border as well as more restrictive immigration policies implemented in over the past two decades.

A former horse farm employee, who asked that his name not be used as he is in the process of applying for residency, says the fear of being picked up by law enforcement or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is always present.

"Sometimes you see a police car, and you think they are looking for you," he says. "Sometimes it's for something else, but in your mind it's, 'They're coming for me.' It's tough."

Farmers are also worried about their employees being deported. "The notion that any grower is going to call immigration over a dispute with a worker and have them deported is absurd," says Pawelski. "Because first off, there's nobody to replace that worker. We're shorthanded. Number two, if ICE comes up, they're not going to come up and take one guy. They're going to come up with a bus and hit every farm in the neighborhood."

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>
> — Chris Pawelski

And in an area like the Hudson Valley, that spells disaster for everyone.

The former horse farm employee worked at various farms for 14 years before he landed a construction job that allows him to spend more time with his family. He loved working with animals and made good money, but the job required him to be on the road for eight months a year.

Now he has a 40-hour workweek and is trying to achieve residency, a path available to undocumented workers who meet a rigid set of criteria. Candidates must prove they have continuously lived in the U.S. for at least 10 years, possess a clean criminal record, and that removal from the U.S. would cause extreme hardship for a family member. He is hopeful his case will be approved.

One success story from the residency program is Maria, a former farm worker who

moved to the U.S. in 1994 when she was 17 years old. At the time, she was enrolled in nursing school in Mexico, but came to stay with her sister on a prolonged visit. "When I went back to my country, I see the difference," she explains in English. "[In the U.S.] I make $5 an hour, and make $2 all day working there, so I just decided to come back."

A mother of five, Maria worked for several years on an onion farm, and then as a line cook in a restaurant. After applying for permanent residency, she waited five years to receive approval. One of her children is mentally disabled and requires special services, which are hard to access in Mexico. Maria thinks this may have helped her case.

"Every time I had to go to court, I was so nervous," she says, "and I just hope the jurors think of my kids."

Now, two of her children are in college studying photography and pre-med. Maria works full time in the dining hall at a local university, and also as a cook on weekends. She hopes to return to nursing school one day — maybe once the college bills are paid.

In a few weeks, Maria is planning to take her mother, who is sick with cancer, back to Mexico. But for her kids, who are U.S. citizens, Mexico is as foreign a country as anywhere else. "My kids don't know my country," she says. "They don't know Spanish."

They are not alone. Hanging on a wall in the WAMC is a framed poem by Eduardo, a 14-year-old. In one verse, he writes:

It is not easy to be different
It is not easy to fit in
When your parents don't speak English
And your world is not the same as
your friends.

The WAMC helps foster a sense of community — not only for kids, but for their parents as well — by bridging culture gaps with programs like Dulce Esperanza. Because of that, the organization has earned the support of farmers in the area. "The stuff that is done at The Alamo, those programs that Kathy Brieger does — the 'Here to Help' with the homework stuff and the sewing stuff and the day camp — those are all boots-on-the-ground services that actually benefit these families on a day-in, day-out basis," says Pawelski.

Under the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act, New York farm workers will exercise more leverage in labor negotiations, receive a mandatory day of rest each week, and earn time-and-a-half pay for working more than 60 hours per week. However, their schedules are also likely to see drastic changes, since farmers still need to make the math work. "I'm going to have to try to rely on chemical control more," Pawelski explains. "Because when it comes to harvest time, I've got to work 7 to 7. I've got to work 7 days so I can get it done before it gets too cold, it freezes, and I lose the crop."

The consensus among farm workers is less clear. A portion of the population seems either unaware or uninterested in the legislation; some support the new overtime rule, while others express concern over the effect it could have on their hours.

How the new law will transform the delicate economy of New York agriculture remains to be seen, but life on the farm and at the Greenmarket are likely to see changes. However, the law does make one thing clear: farm workers deserve more recognition and respect in our food system. As Nick Cippollone, president of the Rondout Valley Grower's Association, put it at the Mohonk Conference last fall:

"We need to think about this every time we sit down to eat."

The workers featured in these photos are not the inviduals interviewed in the article.

Dulce Esperanza helps foster a sense of community for kids straddling two cultures.

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