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commentary

My Summer Under the Tents: Interviews with Migrant Farm Workers in the Connecticut River Valley

—Jennifer Cook (Edited by John Greene)

Growing up in Windsor, Connecticut, I never thought about the white linen tents covering much of the town's farmland. Nor did I contemplate the lives of the young Spanish-speaking men I often saw at the grocery store during the summer months. But above all, I certainly never expected that one summer I would find myself crawling on my hands and knees, snapping the sticky stems of tobacco leaves under those very same white tents, surrounded by migrant farm workers from Central America and the Caribbean.

In 2009, I applied for and received a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) to investigate the lives of these workers so that I could better understand one of the nation's most hotly debated topics: immigration. For ten weeks I worked as a volunteer translator for the University of Connecticut's Migrant Farm Worker Clinic (MFWC), a mobile health clinic that provides free services to agricultural workers in the Connecticut River Valley.

Also known as the "Tobacco Valley," the Connecticut River Valley has a long history of agricultural productivity and has been one of the nation's leading shade tobacco growing areas since the 1800s (Boynton 2007). Connecticut shade tobacco is a highly delicate crop which is used for the outer wrapper of fine Dominican cigars, and as a result it is extremely labor intensive to cultivate and harvest. Windsor is located at the center of the tobacco-producing region, and is home to two of the largest tobacco producers in the state. To provide these farms with the necessary labor, over 600 migrant workers come to Windsor each summer primarily from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Jamaica. Unfortunately, town residents have a very limited understanding of who they are and why they come; I have often heard residents discuss their discomfort when encountering the farm workers in places like the grocery store, public library, or bank. By sharing some of these workers' life stories, I hope to alleviate some of this tension and to reveal the oft-overlooked human face of migration.



The author standing in a dormant tobacco field in Windsor, Connecticut.

The Mexican Experience

I did not ask the legal status of the workers I interviewed, but it became clear that this was a very influential factor in their experiences. One of my very first interviews was with Alejandro, a Mexican man in his fifties. (All names used are pseudonyms.) While following employment opportunities in several different crops, he has travelled from Mexico to California to Florida, and all the way up the East Coast to Connecticut. In July, at the time of our conversation, he had not been back to see his wife since he left Mexico seven years ago. While Alejandro did not tell me why he had not been back to see his family, it is likely that he is an undocumented worker. If he were to leave the United States, he has no guarantee that he will be able to come back to continue working to support his family.



Another Mexican worker was Manuel, an eighteen-year-old male. “I left school to be able to help my family,” he said. “I took the decision to leave, but it was very difficult.” He said that he travels to the United States with no guarantee of employment. Though he returns to Mexico every year, he always comes back to the US early in March to improve his chances of finding work. On his most recent journey across the border he traveled with three of his close friends. The others were “lost.” While he did not explain further, it was clear to me from the look on his face that these friends had perished. Hardships like those experienced by Alejandro and Manuel were often related to their lack of documentation.

Worker stacking freshly picked tobacco leaves. Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Health Council, Hartford, CT.

Jamaican H-2A Workers

The Jamaican workers I interviewed were working in the US through the H-2A guest worker program, which arranges labor contracts for Jamaicans to come to the US to work when farmers cannot find sufficient domestic labor. While I initially thought that because of this program, Jamaicans would have a more positive experience working in the United States than their undocumented counterparts, my interviews revealed a more complex picture.

Patrick, a Jamaican tobacco worker, explained that he had been coming to work in the US for thirty-two consecutive years, traveling from Florida’s sugar cane fields to Connecticut’s tobacco tents to Maine’s apple orchards on each trip. Unfortunately, he explained, the program does not provide guest workers with avenues for gaining permanent residency. Even though Patrick has worked in the United States for a total of fifteen years, he is no closer to getting a green card. As a result, he remains dependent upon the H-2A program, and is denied the opportunity to advance his career and thus escape the cycle of poverty so many farm workers experience.

Another Jamaican worker named Delmar explained that the program allows American employers to select which Jamaican workers they want to hire back each year. As a result, many Jamaican H-2A workers feel that they can’t speak up about problems they have in the work place because they fear employers will not hire them back. Delmar admitted that he tells his co-workers to withhold their complaints, saying “This program helps...I don’t want them to tear it apart.” Thus, whereas I assumed workers coming through a legal program would be protected from workplace abuse, the opposite is true. The program keeps them silent.

Puerto Ricans: American Citizens

As American citizens, I assumed that the Puerto Rican workers would report a more positive experience than Mexicans and Jamaicans. However, this wasn’t necessarily the case. The workers I spoke with explained that because of the incredibly high unemployment rate in Puerto Rico, they were dependent upon seasonal agricultural work in the US to support their families. When they return to the island during the winter months, they rely upon unemployment benefits to survive. While this experience undoubtedly provides them with a better income than the alternative in Puerto Rico, the wages they receive are not enough to improve their socioeconomic status or to move out of low-paying farm work. Furthermore, because of their status as migrant workers, they feel they are perceived by their fellow Americans as second-class citizens. According to Roberto, one of my interviewees, Puerto Ricans are categorized as “Hispanics,” when in reality, he explained, “we’re Americans.”

Despite this feeling of disenfranchisement, Julio, another Puerto Rican worker, explained that he felt a responsibility as an American citizen to help protect the rights of his co-workers, who were often undocumented immigrants. He said that “corrupt farmers” sometimes try to pay undocumented workers less, but that “if they tried that, we would help [the workers] out... We know everyone is supposed to be paid the same.” Fortunately, Puerto Ricans are protected as American citizens and feel that they can stand up to violations of the rights of their co-workers. This may be one of the few advantages they have over their counterparts.

The Human Face of Migration

These stories highlight some of the similarities and differences among the experiences of migrant workers in Connecticut. Among my interviewees, Mexicans had the most erratic work patterns, often working for several different employers in a single year and spending the longest periods of time away from home. Jamaicans, despite their “legal” status as guest workers, feel they cannot speak up about abuse in the workplace, and come to the US year after year without making any progress toward becoming eligible for permanent residency. Puerto Ricans are legal American citizens, but feel they are not treated as such and remain dependent on seasonal employment and unemployment benefits. All of these workers share one thing in common: they are part of a marginalized class that is dependent upon seasonal agricultural work to survive.

Migrant farm workers are a vital segment of American society because they literally put food in our mouths, but we do not treat them with the respect they deserve. As Julio eloquently explained, “If it weren’t for the hand of the Latino farm worker, Americans would have nothing to eat.” Patrick also recognized the dependence of the agricultural industry on migrant farm workers. “I think they need us the same way we need them...but they don’t treat us as if they need us.” As Cesar Chavez, legendary farm labor organizer once put it, “When the man who feeds the world by toiling in the fields is himself deprived of the basic rights of feeding, sheltering and caring for his own family, the whole community of man is sick” (UFW, 2009).

If there is one thing I learned from speaking with these workers, it is that the differences that separate us are not really so great. As one author put it, “The tragedy of our nation’s farm workers lies not in their difference from other Americans but rather in their great and overwhelming similarity” (Rothenberg, xviii). The workers I met took pride in their work, and had a high degree of integrity.

While volunteering for the Migrant Farm Worker Clinic, I learned a great deal about immigration as a social issue. But the biggest impact of my research took me by complete surprise—the experience was deeply personal. Because I wanted to understand what these workers experience on a daily basis, I went to a farm to get the experience of “working tobacco.” When I arrived, the workers welcomed me to the field with smiles and laughter. They took me under their wings, and allowed me into their work and their lives. They showed me how to snap off the tobacco leaves without breaking them, how to distinguish the keepers from the bad leaves, and even forgave me for stepping on a pile of leaves, rendering them worthless. One Jamaican worker even jokingly called me his “American daughter.” That day was when I realized that the most important outcome of my project was not my academic contribution to research on migrant farm workers, but rather the personal relationships I created with the workers.



Migrant workers pull in harvested tobacco leaves using a bicycle-like apparatus. Photo courtesy of the CT Area Health Education Center.

So, while it is important to work for policy change, let us never forget the human face of America’s migrant farm workers and the importance of our attitude towards them. When you take a bite out of an apple, remember that a fellow human being picked it, and be thankful for the essential service they provide to our nation. Perhaps once these workers are accepted socially, and their vital importance to our survival is understood, we will be able to implement policies that will bring them justice and equality.

Thank you to the UNH Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, to UNH Professors Alasdair Drysdale and Courtney Kurlanska, University of Connecticut Professor Mark Overmyer-Velazquez, and the UCONN Migrant Farm Worker Clinics. Most importantly, thank you to the hard-working individuals who so graciously shared their lives with me, despite the hardships they must overcome on a daily basis as migrant farm workers in the United States.

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Author Bio

Jennifer Cook of Windsor, Connecticut, is not one to follow the beaten path. After designing her own major in International Development and graduating from the University of New Hampshire in fall 2009, she now resides in Washington D.C. where she interns for Women Thrive Worldwide. This non-profit organization advocates for policies that give women and families the tools they need to escape poverty. Jennifer works in the Global Partnerships Department, which is responsible for communicating with women's organizations in the poorest countries and bringing their messages to US policy makers.

Growing up in a tobacco-growing town that relies on migrant labor, Jennifer's interest in immigration started at a young age. This interest grew stronger while studying abroad in South Africa, where she interviewed Zimbabwean immigrants living in the city of Durban. Hearing their stories, Jennifer couldn't help but be reminded of the tobacco workers in Windsor, and this prompted her to apply for a 2009 Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) to interview migrant farm workers in her hometown. Although she is leaving her career path open, Jennifer is well on her way to fulfilling her goal to advocate for those who do not have a platform to voice their concerns. "Whatever I do, I need to feel like the work I am doing is meaningful and helpful in some way," she says.

Mentor Bio

Jennifer Cook's mentor for her SURF project was Professor **Alasdair Drysdale**, a faculty member in UNH's Department of Geography for thirty-four years, whose research interests include population, political geography, and the Middle East. Professor Drysdale also served as Jennifer's academic adviser for her self-designed major, and as such had the privilege of watching her interest in immigration expand and flourish over her four years at UNH. "Being an educator, it is always rewarding to work with a student as inquisitive and driven as Jennifer Cook is," says Drysdale.