



Fields of Dreams



Ontario migrant workers endure 12-hour days, low pay and cramped living quarters—all in the hopes of earning enough money to support their families back home

Every year, some 25,000 migrant labourers from Mexico and the Caribbean come to Ontario through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. They spend six to eight months of the year on farms in Niagara and Simcoe and Prince Edward County, and send as much money home as possible. Participants live on the farms, sometimes with 20 men to a house, and get paid minimum wage to till the soil, harvest the crops, thin the trees—jobs that most Canadians won’t do. The program is strict: they sign an exclusivity clause, which makes it difficult to work for anyone other than the employer who contracted them. Workers have to pay the bulk of their own travel costs. And if they’re fired, they’re sent home immediately, with little opportunity for appeal. An advocacy group called Justice for Migrant Workers recently launched a campaign called Harvesting Freedom, which is petitioning the federal government to improve workers’ rights. Under the current guidelines, they’re ineligible for permanent residency, and while they’re covered by OHIP, it becomes invalid as soon as their work visas expire—if they’re injured on the job, they can be sent home without health care. Here, a snapshot of four workers who make the trek.

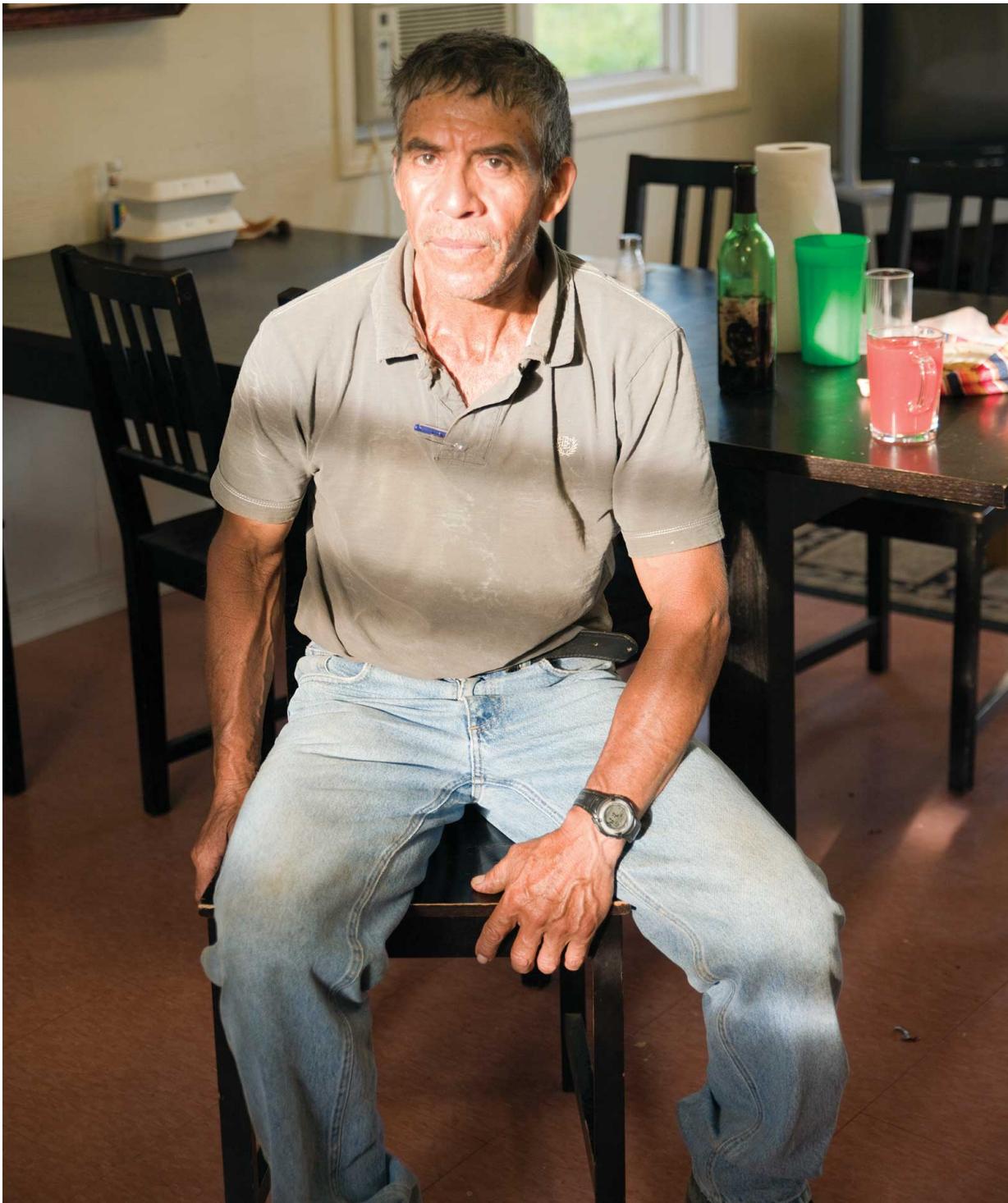
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AGAPITO ALVARADO

Age: 55

Hometown: Tlaxcala, Mexico

First Year Here: 1990

Works At: A winery in Niagara

BACK HOME: In Mexico, Alvarado worked as a *jornalero*—a day labourer planting corn, wheat and barley on farms outside the city. When he got married in 1989, he realized he wasn't making enough to support a family and decided to try his luck in Canada.

COMING TO CANADA: In his first few years, Alvarado worked on farms picking everything from tobacco to broccoli. In 1991, he injured his back while pruning corn crops. He was in so much pain that he couldn't get out of bed. His boss had helped cover his flight to Canada, and Alvarado worried he wouldn't be able to repay him—or worse, that he'd be sent back to Mexico because he couldn't work. He didn't say a word to his boss or seek proper medical care. He got through the pain with muscle relaxants from his co-workers.

LIFE NOW: Alvarado has worked at the same Niagara vineyard for seven years. He arrives in March and stays through October. He lives with seven workers in a small house with four sets of bunk beds. They often work 13-hour days with no overtime pay. Still, he appreciates the job. In Mexico, it would take him two months to earn what he makes in two weeks here. And he's grateful to have learned new farming skills. "I can be happy or sad about all of this. I prefer to be happy," he says.

With the money he earned over the years, Alvarado has been able to build a house back home and buy a washer and dryer. More importantly, he sent two of his kids to university. He now has a wrist injury from repetitive strain. "I might only be able to work one or two more seasons here," he says. The injury may need surgery. He hopes he can get it done before he goes back to Mexico in the winter.

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DALTON BERRY

Age: 45

Hometown: Montego Bay, Jamaica

First Year Here: 2004

Works At: A fruit orchard in Niagara

BACK HOME: Berry spent his 20s building houses—he'd do tiling work, lay concrete blocks, whatever jobs he could get. He had a wife and two kids to support, but he was usually only working six months of the year. There were many days when they couldn't afford groceries.

COMING TO CANADA: Berry's father had lived in Canada before his death, and Dalton always imagined he'd come and live here too. He applied to the

program and underwent a background check and medical exam. He was assigned to a peach farm in Niagara, where he spent nine years and eventually got a management role. In his last year, the crop yield was poor due to a drought. His boss, he says, walked up to him and shouted, “It’s your fault. You didn’t tell the workers how to thin the fruit properly.” The next summer, he didn’t ask Berry back.

LIFE NOW: He has been at his current job for two years—the farm grows grapes, peaches, plums and cherries. Like most workers, he lives on-site and shares an un-air-conditioned trailer with two other men. “It doesn’t feel like home,” he admits. His tasks change every day: he picks fruit, tends soil, thins trees. “The work isn’t hard, but there is a lot of pressure. We need to work fast to set up the pipes for irrigation,” he says.

The program has drastically improved his life in Jamaica. He works in construction during the off-season, and now his family can afford food and shelter, and even save for the future. Berry would like to come live in Canada with his family, but he isn’t eligible for permanent residency. Even though he’s been coming here for 12 years, he’d have to start from scratch if he wanted to apply. “There’s so much to get through to live in this country,” he says.

An advertisement for Microsoft Office 365. It features a young girl with brown hair pulled back, smiling. To her right is text about homework and collaboration. Below the girl is the Office 365 logo and a 'BUY NOW' button.

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JUAN LUIS MENDOZA DE LA CRUZ

Age: 50

Hometown: San Juan Tezompa, Mexico

First Year Here: 1991

Works At: A flower farm in St. Catharines

BACK HOME: In Mexico, de la Cruz tried to make a living growing flowers and selling them at market, but there was never enough money—he and his wife had three daughters, and he couldn't pay for their schooling. His house was a shack, with outside walls made from sheets of cardboard.

COMING TO CANADA: For his first few years, he worked every March to October on fruit farms across Ontario. His employer organized the flights and paid for half, and de la Cruz covered the rest. He was completely isolated from his family. The only way to talk to them was via snail mail, which meant he had to wait weeks for a response. After each season, he went back to Mexico and added something to his house. “The first year I did windows, the next I added another room,” he says.

LIFE NOW: At the farm where he works now, de la Cruz fertilizes the soil, and plants and harvests the flowers. “It’s an easy job, but we have to do it over and over, faster and faster,” he says. “We sometimes work 14 hours a day.” He lives in a newly built air-conditioned house with 20 other workers—there are four men in each bedroom. On weekends, he does something he calls land dancing, which is inspired by the movement of sunflowers.

Back in Mexico, de la Cruz has finally finished his house. During the off-season, he grows and sells cacti, and his wife has a makeshift takeout restaurant she runs from home. He plans to keep coming back for the next few years until he has enough money to retire. For him, the biggest drawback of the job is the instability: employers can fire workers for any reason, and there’s no recourse for appeal. “If you don’t do what the boss says, you’re back to Mexico,” he says.

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JUNIOR MODESTE

Age: 50

Hometown: Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

First Year Here: 1991

Works At: An apple orchard in Elgin County

BACK HOME: In the '90s, Modeste was working in construction. The job market was unsteady—he was usually hired to work a few days or weeks, then he'd have to go months without a job. He has a wife and six kids, and they only survived by carefully rationing his income.

COMING TO CANADA: During his early years, he got to pick his placement. He worked on tobacco, cauliflower and tomato farms. Every year, it took a few months before he could start sending money home, because he had to pay for his visa, half his airfare, and boots and rainwear.

LIFE NOW: Modeste works in Canada from March to November. He wakes up before 6 a.m. and gets his cooking done for the day, making a batch of rice and peas. Out in the orchard, he and his co-workers talk about their kids while they're picking apples. The harvest is his favourite time of year. "Everyone is in a better mood," he says. "Soon, we'll return home. We'll return to the families we haven't seen in seven or eight months."

Over the years, Modeste has fallen from ladders a few times. He sustained muscle injuries, received good medical care and was off work for a few weeks. He considers himself lucky—he knows many people who've been injured near the end of their contracts and sent back to countries where there's no health care. Like all other migrant workers, Modeste pays into Canada's EI program and gets OHIP, but he can't receive benefits after he has left the country. "We put food on Canadian tables, and we are not enjoying the same status as the citizens of Canada," he says.

COMMENTS

4 Comments**Toronto Life****Login****Recommend****Share****Sort by Best****Join the discussion...****TristanTerrific** • 2 days ago

Heartbreaking stories. Though the workers are grateful, why not make it standard for them to have better housing situations. How hard would it be to treat these people better?

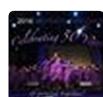
[1 ^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share >](#)**Dave Silver** • an hour ago

I am appalled that we treat people this way. We let 25,000 Syrian people into our country with no problem and refuse entry to people who come here and work hard for us!!!! unbelievable really.

[^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share >](#)**Jane Andres** • 2 days ago

<https://youtu.be/XtXirXyAn18>

If you would like to contribute to this family it would be greatly appreciated. Contact me at jandres@bbniagaraonthelake.com for more information.

[^](#) | [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share >](#)**Jane Andres** • 2 days ago

The farm work program has improved of the lives of thousands of families for the past 50 years. Many Caribbean farm workers have been my neighbours for the past 20 years and I have come to treasure our friendships. The reality of it though is that there is little to no protection for those who suffer injuries on the job. A neighbour and myself have been supporting a family in Jamaica after the father's hand was crushed in a forklift accident at a local nursery in 2008. He has been in constant pain since that time and in 2010 WSIB terminated his physio when they determined he was permanently disabled. In a letter WSIB told him he was capable of working as a cashier in a gas bar with one hand. In Niagara. As a result of his accident his health has deteriorated to the point that we are expecting a call any day that he has passed away leaving his wife and children to suffer on their own. WSIB and the Canadian government has turned a blind eye, expecting he will die before his appeal can be heard. His employer has chosen not to respond to our plea for help. Here's his, and our, story. Is anyone willing to help save his life?

<https://youtu.be/XtXirXyAn18>

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RESTAURANTS

What Toronto's first dog-friendly dinner club looked like

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BY JENNIFER CHENG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GABBY FRANK | AUGUST 17, 2016 AT 3:15 PM

Ossington's Böhmer restaurant was transformed on Monday night into Diner en Bark, the city's first dog-friendly supper club. The private affair, organized by Get Leashed and Co., kicked off with cocktails so the canines—some bred as far away as Germany—could mingle. In attendance: two pugs that have been a couple for nine years, an Instagram fashion icon, a frug that's a bit of a boozehound and a pup that runs a fitness studio. The 30 (human) guests enjoyed a three-course meal, while their dogs snacked on bone-shaped treats courtesy of chef Paul Boehmer, cookies, beef liver and dental sticks. In between

dishes, the dogs got dolled up with bow ties and bandanas for a photo booth. We asked each owner to tell us about their furry friends and their eating habits.





Matti

9, a shih tzu and bichon frise mix from Iowa

Her owner says: “If I open a package of cheese, she’ll bolt from wherever she is—even if she’s deep asleep. She’s also famous for finding hot dogs when I take her for walks. It doesn’t take a lot to make her happy, but she’s quick to destroy any clothes that I try to put her in—Matti’s a nudist.”





Iggy Joey

2, Italian greyhound from Ontario

Her owner says: “Iggy has more than 50 outfits and over 34,000 followers on Instagram. She’ll eat anything, especially bananas, iceberg lettuce and broccoli—I let her have as many vegetables as she wants. I can’t let her off her leash during walks anymore because she ran up to a family in a park last year and stole their chicken. She also went into someone’s bag and stole some cheese. Iggy’s a vacuum—she will not stop eating, but she stays skinny.”



Charlotte

9, pug from Charlotte County, New Brunswick

Her owner says: “She’ll eat until she explodes. Her favourite foods are other dogs’ food and whatever her boyfriend, Lawrence, is eating. When we go to the park, she runs to every person, hoping to find a treat —she sort of ignores all the other dogs.”



Lawrence

10, pug from Toronto

His owner's friend says: “My neighbour fell in love with my pug, so he got one for himself. That was nine years ago, and our dogs have been dating ever since. Lawrence will let Charlotte take his toys, eat out of his bowl and lie on his pillow. He’s an alpha male, but a sucker for romance. He loves carrots—we have to be careful about even saying the word around him. I give him a carrot cake for his birthday every year—of course everyone at the party has a piece, too.”





Ducky

5, potcake from Turks and Caicos

Her owner says: “She has these scars because some people threw acid on her and two other dogs when she was about six-months-old. The SPCA was able to save her, but the other dogs died. Potcakes have a robust constitution: they can eat anything under the sun without being bothered—in Turks and Caicos, they regularly survive off garbage. Ducky’s favourite food is cheese, but she doesn’t get much of it. What Potcakes are most starved of is human affection. If Ducky’s upset with me, she won’t eat. Instead, she’ll sit in front of her food and stare at me until I give her hugs and kisses, then she’ll eat. She spends half the year in Toronto and half in Turks and Caicos—she’s a city girl *and* a Caribbean girl.”





Chloe Deane

4, frug (French Bulldog and Pug mix) from Orangeville

Her owner says: “She likes to eat almost anything but when I open the fridge drawer for cheese, she’s right under my feet. She also likes alcohol. If you put your drink down on my living room floor, trust me, it will be gone.”





Mercy

2, American bulldog and shar-pei mix from Richmond Hill

Her owner says: “Mercy likes to eat Italian, Japanese and Chinese food, but she’s particularly fond of salmon, bacon, steak, chicken and peanut butter. She’s a diva—but in a good way, and she’s daddy’s little girl. When I hug my partner when I get home, she jumps right between us.”



Gigi

6, miniature pinscher from Ontario

Her owner says: “Gigi’s a neat freak. If she’s chewing a biscuit and some crumbs fall to the floor, she’ll finish them before she resumes eating the biscuit. If she’s eating a dental stick, she’ll only eat one side. Also, Gigi has a heart murmur, so she can faint if she gets overexcited.”





Rocky

8, Bernese mountain and white shepherd mix from Pennsylvania

His owner says: “We feed him really healthy food, except on his birthday when give him a vanilla ice cream cone from Ed’s Real Scoop in the Beaches. Everyone in line sings happy birthday to him—probably because he’s wearing a party hat. He’s a therapy dog, so I bring him to a nursing home once a week. Rocky really engages with each person; resting his head on their wheelchairs and making them laugh. He’s also my business partner—for real. I run a boutique fitness studio called Woof-fit, where my clients can bring their dogs along. And yes, they are included in the exercises we do.”



Sultan

9, doberman from Germany

His owner says: “He’s sexy, he’s sleek, he’s suave. So I thought his name has to start with ‘S’ and denote a regal presence. If he had his way, he would always eat human food—especially anything Filipino. He also loves lasagna and pasta because his dad, my partner, is Italian. His original owner brought him here from Germany, then decided to give him up. We took Sultan to obedience school because a lot of people assume the worst about Dobermans, but all dogs—small and big—need discipline.”