



The Sunday Edition

## A thank you dinner for the 'forgotten' migrant workers who pick Canada's food



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Every year 50,000 migrant workers travel to Canada from all over the globe to harvest produce under the Seasonal Agriculture Workers Program. Ten per cent of these laborers end up in the small town of Leamington, Ont. (Alisa Siegel/CBC)

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In the winter, when they usually arrive, they quake in the unfamiliar cold. In the summer, they get so hot their boots and shoes fill with sloshy sweat.

The work is back-breaking. They pick tomatoes, onions, mushrooms, grapes, cucumbers and peppers.

“All these beautiful vegetables and fruits that we have on our table, where did it come from? These are migrant workers who are working to pick it ... They give to us and we should give back to them”

- Joan Grey

Each year, 50,000 migrant labourers come to Canada from the Caribbean, Mexico and beyond through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program.

More than ten per cent of those workers end up in the small town of Leamington, Ont. — Tomato Capital of Canada. Greenhouse Capital of the World.

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## Years of painstaking work





Images from Joan Grey's annual party for the migrant workers. She books a local hall, recruits volunteers to prepare jerk chicken and pork, rice and beans. (Submitted by Joan Grey)

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Some have been coming for more than 25 years. Season after season. Mostly men, mostly alone, for up to eight months at a time.

They sleep in bunkhouses. Airfare to and from Canada is deducted from their earnings.

They buy their own food and supplies. They work six, sometimes seven days a week.

There's not a lot of reason to celebrate. And not many opportunities either.

## A reason to celebrate



Joan Grey runs an annual clothing drive for migrant workers each winter under her charity Unity Hopeful. Additionally, Grey throws a party for the migrant workers hired to work the fields through the Seasonal Agriculture Workers Program. As a local businesswoman in Lemington, it's her way of saying thank you to those who travel from their homes to work in Canadian fields. (Alisa Siegel/CBC)

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But one night every summer, a local businesswoman in Leamington named Joan Grey — who knows what it's like to be down on your luck — throws a party, just for them. She books a local hall, recruits volunteers to prepare jerk chicken and pork, rice and beans.

There's live gospel music, games and a lots of laughs. The farm workers come in droves.

It's Grey's way to show the migrant workers they're not invisible. "I call them the forgotten workers," she said.

"All these beautiful vegetables and fruits that we have on our table, where did it come from? These are migrant workers who are working to pick it... They give to us and we should give back to them," Grey said.

“This is a feeling like we're back home ... I get to see a lot of black people and say, 'Oh, I feel like I'm home. I'm back in Jamaica'”

- Migrant worker

"[In Jamaica], we are friendly people. If you pass someone on the road you don't know, they say hi to you and they wave and you see a genuine smile. But being here I've noticed it's different. It's a culture shock for me, to pass someone and not have someone acknowledge your presence," one migrant worker at the party told *The Sunday Edition's* documentary producer Alisa Siegel.

"Sometimes you will even try and say hi to them, and they just ignore you. It plays on your mind. It makes you feel less than who you are."

At the party, it's a completely different atmosphere.

"This is a feeling like we're back home ... I get to see a lot of black people and say, 'Oh, I feel like I'm home. I'm back in Jamaica,'" another worker said.

*Click 'listen' above to hear Alisa Siegel's documentary "The Forgotten Ones."*

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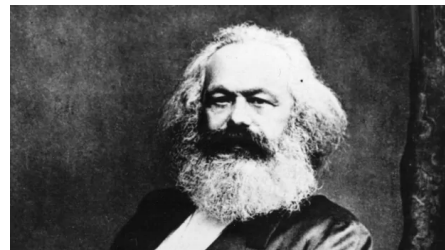
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