

*By Fresh Fruit Portal journalist Kayla Young*

Departing McAllen, Texas on the U.S.-Mexico border, our driver stopped to issue a clear warning to the bus passengers:



“No one try anything funny when they check your documents.”

He repeated the warning in Spanish, leaving no doubt that “they” meant U.S. Border Patrol.

In U.S. agricultural communities, immigrant farm workers are a known reality - though they may stay tucked away from the community at large.

For the undocumented, the simple act of riding the bus can mean taking the risk of deportation.

For 10 years, filmmaker Nancy Ghertner followed the lives of workers much like those on my bus in McAllen. Their stories tread similar ground, repeating the same anxieties, close calls and insecurities that come with immigrant life.

In “After I Pick the Fruit”, she documents five migrant women between their lives in New York, Florida, Mexico and Haiti.

Her story is that of lives split into pieces - between countries, between states, between homes.

Ghertner’s major question of the film - “will they find a place here in my town after they pick the fruit?” - reaches deeper than the issue of finding community.

Where do migrant farm workers fit into the greater scheme of American life? And is there really a place for them “after they pick the fruit”?

At the beginning the film, the women find themselves in a range of legal situations. The common thread that ties them together, however, is the immensely difficult, draining reality of being a foreign worker in the United States.

One of four Mexican women in the film, Maria, has the fortune of working under a green card. She speaks graciously with the filmmaker, but even with documentation, her story has not been easy.

“In 1996 we arrived with two children. We said, should we go? We came, we had no work or

anything. We suffered a lot, a lot because we were here for eight days with no home," she tells Ghertner.

After her family's struggle with homelessness, Maria says they received a gift from God - a work offer from a farm willing to house her children.

"It wasn't easy. It was difficult because there were four or five men who lived there that were always drunk. They would fight in their room. I was always afraid something would happen. We lived there two months."

✘ The willingness of each woman to undergo extreme hardship connects to a common cause - the future of her children.

One woman who advocates for farm workers in her free time, says that she suffers so her children will not have to.

"So my kids can have different work than ours because it's very hard to be in the sun all the time. Sometimes there's nowhere to go to the bathroom. Sometimes they don't give us water," she says.

Later, her husband is deported and she is left to care for her family on her own. Like many others in the film, she cannot go back to Mexico to see him because she may never be able to return.

In an effort to better integrate himself in the community, another husband in the film, Antonio, also suffers deportation.

En route to represent farm worker parents at a conference in Philadelphia, he is asked aboard the bus to present his papers to border patrol. Unlike on my bus leaving McAllen, no warning had been issued to protect the undocumented.

Antonio's story inserts an extra element of doubt into the initial question, "will they find a place here in my town after they pick the fruit?"

Is there a place in the community to be had by migrant farm workers?

Even with employer support and local ties, for those who do not achieve legal status by the end of the film, their lives must remain largely hidden and complicated.

For a lucky few, citizenship becomes a reality.

Vierge, a migrant worker from Haiti, is granted her citizenship and manages to buy a home for her family in Florida.

Her story shows a major turnaround from the beginning of the film, when she heartbreakingly tells Ghertner that she can never visit home again: “I ain’t got no green card. I ain’t got no papers. If I go, I’m never coming back.”

Even for those who still have not achieved legal status, however, there is glimmer of hope. That major motivator - the children - serves as an example of cultural and social integration.

One woman’s daughter is accepted to study at a U.S. university, where signs of community acceptance are more obvious.

“I think all of the American kids of her age are realizing that this country can be black, white, brown, blue or red if possible. Any color a person can be, any of them can be Americans,” the mother says.

There is no easy answer to Gherther’s question nor is there a clear definition of what life “after the fruit” might look like.

For many in the film, life becomes easier but it certainly never becomes easy. The hidden faces of the undocumented remain hidden and the struggle continues.

At least for me, “After I Pick the Fruit” provoked many more questions than it gave answers; and perhaps that is the goal of the film.

Ghertner’s documentary does not try to make any bold statements about immigration reform or workers’ rights. She does, however, create five emotionally powerful stories that give a face to a largely unseen workforce. She takes the time to unveil the women behind our fruit, even if we are left with an ambiguous “after.”

Though the film lacks a certain visual appeal, Ghertner’s work is worth a watch by those interested in the origin of their food and the people of their community.

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