

SAF

STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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This summer helped me to understand that I can make a difference in someone's life. It has also taught me that if I want my people to speak up for themselves, I need to start speaking up more.

-Nancy Preciado, 2006 Intern

Check out these photos of the 2006 ITF Interns!

Stories from the Summer: Focus on Intern Writings

by Lupe Huitron, Internship Coordinator of Student Action with Farmworkers

Who are farmworkers? They are our neighbors and friends. In some cases, they are our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers. Who are we? We are the children of farmworkers, the neighbors and friends who choose to stand beside them in a unified call for justice and equality.

I was born a poor farmworkers daughter- farm work has been and continues to be a part of my life. When I came to North Carolina one year ago, I wanted to change the world, give my knowledge and experience to workers. I never imagined that I would receive so much in return. Visiting with farmworkers gave me the opportunity to know their fears, concerns, and struggles. Many come here with dreams of a better future and with the belief that if they work hard enough, nothing bad will happen to them. Yet the reality is that many will never reach their dreams- because our society does not value them enough to give them the means to do so.

So I ask myself: *Why do this work?*

Since 1992, SAF has given students like me an opportunity to work alongside one of the most marginalized populations in our country through the Into the Fields summer internship and leadership development program. This past summer, twenty-five college students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds worked collectively to support farmworkers as they addressed health and safety concerns, wage & hour issues and discrimination in the work place.

The following writings chronicle the experiences of ten young people as they encountered and interacted with farmworkers in North and South Carolina. These journal entries give us a unique insight into the lives of farmworkers and advocates alike, portraying first hand accounts of privilege, oppression, and poor living and working conditions. They also narrate stories of dignity, humility, personal growth and learning. I hope that the passion, sorrow and camaraderie the interns express through these writings will educate and inspire you.

When we think of an advocate, many conjure up the idea of a brave, heroic leader who saves those in need. Ironically, it is not always we as advocates who lead the way, but rather those we serve who educate and inspire us. They are the ultimate instructors: teaching us sacrifice, hard work and dedication. I believe that this is why I do this work, not for what I can give to farmworkers but for what I may be privileged to receive.



SAF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.

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Laxmi Haynes, National Student Organizer
Lupe Huitron, Internship Coordinator
Tony Macias, Assistant Director
Rocío Rangel, Migrant Youth Director
Denise VanDeCruze, Operations Manager
Melinda Wiggins, Executive Director
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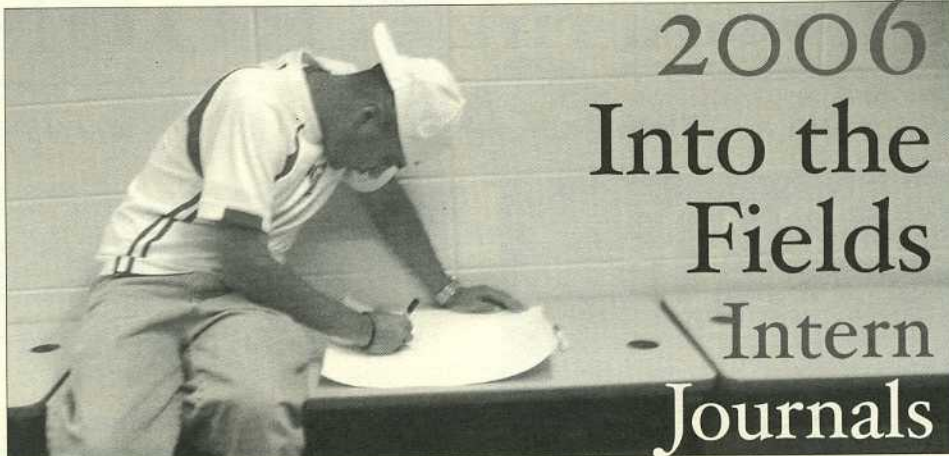
For more information or to submit articles to the newsletter, contact:

From the Ground Up Editor
Tony Macias- tmacias@duke.edu

SAF

Student Action with Farmworkers
1317 W. Pettigrew Street
Durham, NC 27705
(919) 660-3652; (919) 681-7600 (fax)
www.saf-unite.org

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2006 Into the Fields Intern Journals

Sarah Stephens- June 21, 2006

"Keep going and make a right at the red flag."

We had been driving down the same twisting country road for about 20 minutes and on our left huge brick houses lined a man-made lake. The cluster of houses was bordered by an ornate sign labeled "Buckhorn Plantation." As we passed the houses I still could not see any sign of a red flag. "You just missed it, turn around." As we turned around I saw that the "red flag" was nothing but a 4 by 5 inch piece of red plastic attached to a small wire sticking out of the overgrown grass. We pull onto a rocky dirt rode and drive through the endless fields of sweet potato plants. After about a quarter of a mile we drive through a row of trees and into a clearing with a set of three cement barns with red tin roofs.

As we pull up in a minivan to pick up patients for the clinic the few women quickly run inside and several men duck back into their barracks (the terminology used for farmworker residences which are primarily converted barns). Within seconds the area is empty of people. I approach the kitchen door and a small woman peeks outside. I introduce myself as a health outreach worker and read the list of names of men who have medical appointments that evening. The woman continues peering at me through the crack in the screen door, abruptly says that none of the men are there and closes the door.

I stood outside the kitchen alone and confused...frightened eyes looked at me through closed doors.

"They are afraid.... They don't know your face..."
-I am told.

They are in constant fear of immigration, of being deported, of losing their job. Their undocumented status prevents them from receiving healthcare, prevents them from filing housing complaints, prevents them of rights they are guaranteed. They live in a culture of fear and intimidation, and even a 5'4" female from a health clinic could pose a threat.

- Our cheap food comes at high costs.

Our immigration policy allows for cheap labor and unregulated working and living conditions. My political views on immigration policy have been changed over the past few weeks, because I saw the precedence and need for policy change. Keeping workers in fear of deportation is a form of oppression, just as many black Americans were oppressed throughout US history. During orientation SAF showed us a map of the locations of the concentrations of sharecroppers and slaves over a hundred years ago. The SAF interns all noticed that we would be living in the same places.

We pull out past the red flag, van empty; out of the 7 workers we were supposed to pick up none came...out of fear, out of lack of money...it is difficult to know. The water ripples over the lake and the Buckhorn Plantation sign swings in the breeze. Our food has always come at a price. Oppression in the South never ended...it still continues- just more quietly.*

Jessica García- June 28, 2006

One of the days that I was doing outreach -I don't remember the exact date- I remember talking to one of the farmworkers and I started asking him questions of what part of México he came from and what was it that brought him here... After he responded to those questions I opened up to him and told him about myself, that my parents were from México and that they worked in the fields as well.

He then seemed to be more in his comfort zone and he began to tell me how difficult it was for him to raise his family and he spoke more in depth about them. I then began to tell him how sometimes, even though we live here in the United States already, we still go through our rough moments. I began to tell him briefly about my childhood experiences, even though at the time of telling him I started choking up. Conversations like the one I had with the farmworker are what allow us to make a better connection with them in helping them. This is something I wrote from our conversation once I got home:

Sin Título

Todo nuestro trabajo, todo nuestro esfuerzo
Es un paso más para no quebrarnos el pescuezo.
Semana, día y noche, fines de semana
Le pedimos tanto a Dios que mejore el mañana.

Mis hombros me duelen, mi cuerpo se agota
Cuando el trabajo no es bueno
siento la lluvia gota a gota.
Mis pensares se hunden entre mi nostalgia
Hundiendo mi corazón, suspirando por magia.

Para mis padres o para mi esposa e hijos
Levanto cada cosecha para pronto volver a verlos.
Camino por el campo como un vagabundo
Navegando con mi Dios adelante
Recorriendo por todo el mundo.

Untitled

All of our hard work, all of our strength
It's a closer step...to not break our necks
Weeks, days and nights, weekends
We ask God to enlighten our tomorrow

My shoulders are sore and hurt,
my body feels weak
When the work of harvesting is not good,
I feel the rain, raindrop by raindrop
Sinking my heart, hoping for magic

For my father and mother or wife and children
I pick and pull every harvest to see them real soon.
I walk through the fields like a vagabond
Walking with my God in front of me
Traveling the world, to seek what's ahead.

Amy Gellatly- July 10, 2006

I thoroughly enjoyed mid retreat. This group of interns is incredible. Never before in my life have I felt so close to such a big group of people that I've only spent a total of 15 days with.

There is a certain characteristic that I have become more aware of this summer, and it is called humility... During our SAF orientation one intern mentioned that her humility made her strong. If you had asked me before that week to give a list of characteristics associated with strength and success I would have included words like determination, courage, self-confidence, knowledge, being understanding and accepting. I've been thinking a lot about the culture in which I was raised which I feel like has always told me that I could achieve anything I wanted. I'm starting to wonder if it was all for the right reasons. Is it because American society believes in the potential of every individual or more just those who are born with privilege?

"During our SAF orientation one intern mentioned that her humility made her strong"

I am starting to understand the meaning of humility by my visits with farmworkers. My only interaction with arrogance during the entire internship occurred when a grower came to his front door in his underwear to see what I wanted. I felt an absolute lack of respect from this man towards myself as a woman. This experience really emphasized for me how welcoming and respectful the farmworkers have been to my fellow intern and me during our many unexpected visits to their homes. They may be proud of who they are and where they come from, but they express this in a very peaceful way that never involves anyone being better than anyone else.

So one of my new goals for the summer is to become a more humble person- for example not to get so many thrills out of personal successes... Humility is a way to be strong and believe in yourself without your strength coming at the expense of any other person, and I am very grateful that I have been able to meet so many wonderfully strong people this summer. *

Erica Bratz- July 14, 2006

It is really interesting for me to begin to understand the need for connections to be made when working toward social change. I am not just talking about finding all of the people who think, dress, and feel the same way I do, but seeking out people who, personally for me, I would never have been talking to. In order to effect change, comfort boundaries need to be crossed. In my case, it probably makes more sense for me to take the first step and go meet a religious community group than for them to come to my anarchist collective. I have understood for some time the need for intergenerational movement building, as well as all other sorts of cross-pollination of ideas with groups who are different than me in various ways. *

