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Young Haitian experiences camp life

An interview with a former migrant worker

This article is reprinted from the 2011 premiere edition of the Haitian Migrant Worker Journal.

*Jean was sixteen years old last summer, when he traveled to New Jersey to work the blueberry harvest. It was his first paying job. He had arrived in the U.S. from Haiti at the age of 13, and at 16, he had just completed 10th grade. His family heard from neighbors that the blueberry growers in New Jersey would be hiring workers. Jean's father stayed in Florida, where he had a job. Jean's mother brought all of her children to New Jersey. They rode a farm labor bus. It was a long trip from Florida to New Jersey with no air conditioning on the bus. They were glad to arrive at the migrant camp in Hammonton, in Atlantic County.

Jean's younger brothers and sisters attended a migrant education program, except for the youngest who stayed with a sitter. Jean was legally old enough to work in the fields, on the same crew with his mother.

Jean says, "Before I came to the migrant camp, I heard that the work would not be hard. They said teens pick faster than adults because they have smaller hands. They said it would be hot in the sun."

When asked if there was anything different from what he expected, Jean replied, "There were so many people at the camp." Speaking about the work, he continued, "If there weren't enough blueberries to pick one day, we had to finish early and get paid for less hours. They started putting people in the row where you're picking – so you have fewer berries to pick. Some people go in your row to get more berries even when they were not told to go there. Then people get mad." Haitian Migrant Worker Outreach (HMWO) has spoken with people who grew up in Hammonton; the tendency of some pickers to encroach on others' territory seems to be a universal experience in the blueberry fields.

When asked what else made the work hard, Jean stated, "Sometimes people will steal your blueberry box. You have to keep it in front of you while



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you're picking. You have a small box you are holding which you empty into the bigger box. You have to keep moving the big box and keep watching it, or someone might take it. I had that happen to me once. I learned! If they steal an empty box, you might have to walk a long ways to pick up another one. If they steal a full box, they're stealing your pay.

"There are not a lot of cook stoves. Some people have to wait their turn to cook. And when a lot of people bathe, it uses up the hot water. Then you have to wait because the water is too cold. Also there is no privacy in the showers and I'm not used to bathing with other people. There weren't enough buses to take all the workers out to the fields together. They had to make three trips. Some people have to wake up very early and go to the bus."

The daily routine included breakfast, "I usually had rice and spaghetti with tomato and meat sauce. I packed my lunch in a bag. You could buy a cold drink at lunch from the food sellers in their cars. You could buy food and drink. There is no lunch break; you can stop and eat

whenever you want. At the end of the day some people try to get on the bus first, so they can go home early and get the first shower.”

During his free time, in the evenings, Jean spent time with friends he made in the camp. “I played cards with them and we joked around. They brought cards and dominoes. There was a TV in one of the dorms. Some teens who came brought their own X-Box. Some American teens came and played soccer with us about twice a week. They came from a church in Vineland. I loved to watch them play soccer. There weren't enough benches to sit on, but I brought a chair.”

Jean's advice for migrant workers: “Don't make trouble at work. Do what the crew boss says. Sometimes when the boss says to fill the boxes, people don't do it properly. You can't put green berries in, and you have to fill it all the way. People who want to have more pay might get careless. If the box has green berries the boss cannot accept it.”

Jean's plans for the future: “This summer, when I finish driving school, I'm going to work as a cook in a restaurant. I want to finish high school and go to college. I want to be an athlete, playing basketball and if I don't make it I'm going to be a business major. I'd like to have a car dealership.”

What Jean would like to read in the next issue of Haitian Migrant Worker Journal: “I'd like to read about camp news!”

If Jean were producing a movie on the topic of migrant labor: “It would be a documentary about

the problems in the migrant camp. People are stealing in the fields, and in the dorms, too. You need locking boxes to put your things in, and rooms with door locks.”

What would Jean try to do differently if he were the farm owner? “I'd try to fix the hot water first, and increase people's pay! (When Jean worked picking blueberries, he gave his pay to his mother.) I'd try to have more bus drivers and more buses and build more dormitories.”

Editors Note: When Dory Dickson drove a farm labor bus in California, in 2006, she lived in a migrant camp. The hardships and inconveniences Jean experienced are a part of migrant life everywhere: labor buses making multiple runs, problems with theft in the dormitories, hot water running out, people waiting their turn to use the kitchen, and pay that doesn't stretch far enough. Camps in the Hammonton area, which have been visited by HMWO (Haitian Migrant Worker Outreach) appear to meet or exceed regulations pertaining to migrant housing. That said, group life in a dormitory by its nature deprives one of privacy. For most migrant workers, living in a camp is part of the challenge of doing migrant farm labor.

HMWO would like to thank Jean for an informative interview. We wish him luck in his upcoming senior year of high school and in the years ahead. We will try to stay in touch with Jean, so we can report back to our readers to tell them how he's doing.

**Jean is a pseudonym.*



Rhody Caceres's Story, as told to her daughter, Xiomara Perez



MWO file photo

I was 25 years old when I started working in the fields, a job I did for only one year. I worked at two different farms, which I went to with my friends. Seven nights a week I worked in a chicken processing plant and on the weekends I worked in the fields. We would start picking blueberries around seven in the morning. I would work till one or two in the afternoon. Some of my friends worked till five p.m., but since I had another job to go to, I couldn't stay that long.

I had to keep my 18 month old daughter, Yadira on a child safety leash, to make sure she was always by my side. Since she was so young and so small, it was very easy for her to run off. My older daughter, Joemayra, was seven years old. She attended a migrant education program during the summer, so she usually was not in the fields with me.

The hardest part of the job was definitely not picking the blueberries; the hardest part for me and for the other workers was carrying the trays so far, to bring them to

the truck on the other side of the field. Then we would have to walk back and spend time searching for the spot where we left off picking.

There's one thing that I think would make blueberry picking easier. Instead of having us carry the trays manually, they should provide each person with a hand truck. A hand truck has a small ledge to set objects on, and the trays of blueberries would fit perfectly on that little ledge. Then the workers wouldn't have so much stress on their shoulders and would be able to move from one side of the field to the other much faster.

Another hard thing about the work was that we were constantly sunburned from being under the sun for excessive hours; that's one of the main reasons I have so many freckles. Many times the temperature would reach 100 degrees in the afternoon. But the most dangerous part about being in the fields was that there were snakes that hid in the dirt and would slither around our feet. We always had to keep an eye out for them.

We received a ticket for each tray of blueberries that we handed in. We would save our tickets until we felt we had enough, and then cash the tickets in for money. The tickets for each tray picked were worth \$1.25. I usually carried 3 trays at a time. Since I was constantly picking, sometimes I would collect up to \$200 a month. (That was in 1982.)

With my pay, I would go to secondhand shops, like Goodwill, and buy school clothes for my little girls. Even though the clothes were used, they were all I could afford. The teachers would always compliment my girls on how nicely they were dressed. This is why I was never a fan of name brand clothing; one can look presentable like my girls did, with shirts and skirts that cost only a couple of dollars.

When I came to New Jersey, from Puerto Rico, I didn't speak English. I moved into a trailer with a lady named Cameron and her boyfriend who was the crew leader and in charge of the farm workers. Because he was the crew boss, he had a trailer of his own that was right next to the field. Cameron had three little girls; I had two. There were eight of us living in this two-room trailer in an area called White Horse. I lived there for the first year that I was in the United States.

Checking berries in at the field truck

Junior, 22, FL

This was my first summer working in the blueberry harvest. I worked in the fields picking blueberries in North Carolina. When the picking was finished there, I came here to Hammonton, New Jersey. I asked for a job on the truck and I got approved.

When the workers bring their baskets of blueberries to the truck, I check to be sure there aren't too many green berries and twigs, or berries that are sunburned to a darker color. If the berries are good, I give the worker a ticket which will be cashed in for pay. If the berries aren't good, I give the basket back and the worker has to dump it out, or sort out the bad

berries and bring it back to be re-checked. I stack the boxes of berries in the truck. When the truck is full, we tie the baskets down, so they won't fall, and we drive to the packing house to unload.

I like the heavy lifting. Sometimes people come with five or six boxes stacked on their head and I just grab them all together. That's about sixty or seventy pounds. It's not an easy job. Sometimes when it starts raining everybody wants to hurry up and get out of there. Then we have to check the boxes of berries really fast.

**Interview conducted August 2016*



MWO file photo



MWO file photo

The Blueberry Packing House

by Guillermo*, as told to L-MTJ

In my family I'm an anchor baby, a first generation American Citizen. My parents came to the United States to build a better life. I live in New Jersey year-round. When I graduate from high school this June, I plan to attend Atlantic Cape Community College before transferring to a four-year college.

I worked in the packing house for three years, starting when I was fifteen. I found out about the job through a family member. I had to fill out an application, and I got trained on the job. We watched a safety film about *Situational Awareness*, so we wouldn't get hit by a forklift, or have some other accident.

Most days there were about fifteen of us working in the same room in the packing house. About half of us lived in town, and half were migrant workers who lived in the migrant camp. The people I worked with were nice.

There was a guy who worked with us, whom everyone liked. He had an entertaining personality and once in a while he would be joking around and accidentally knock over half a stack of empty boxes. Then he would cry out in a soft voice, "Uh-oh! Watch out!" We always laughed.

At the beginning of each summer, my feet hurt the most because I was standing on cement all day. When I would sit down on my lunch break, it was like heaven! We also got fifteen minutes off after working two or three hours straight.

It wasn't too noisy in the packing house, but there was the sound of ventilation fans and machinery. The packing house was about sixty to seventy degrees fahrenheit. In the morning it would feel cold, but the sun would warm up the roof and walls and then it would warm up inside, too.

We got an hour off for lunch. During that time the ventilation fans kept the work area cool, but the conveyor belts and other machinery would be turned off. Most of us brought our own food to eat.

Here's how the packing house is set up. Two workers pour trays of berries onto a conveyor belt, a single layer of berries deep, and the belt carries them through the sorting machine. In the sorter, lasers identify twigs and green berries and soft or over-ripe berries. Puffs of air shoot the twigs and green berries

onto another belt which carries refuse to a collection bin. Soft berries are shot onto a belt which carries them to a collection bin where they await further processing (as juice berries.) The bulk of the berries, which will be sold fresh, continue on the main conveyor belt. The machine misses some of the berries that need to be removed and another group of workers (mostly female) stand on both sides of the belt, picking out the green berries or whatever the machine missed.

The main conveyor belt drops the good berries down onto a smaller belt which carries them to a funnel. The funnel guides the berries into individual clear plastic pint containers sold at grocery stores and markets.

The filled pint containers are also on a conveyor belt which carries them to an area where four workers pack them into cardboard boxes, 12 pints in a box. The boxes are hand packed onto pallets, in layers reaching above head height. A forklift is used to lift the pallet (with its high stack of boxes) a little bit off the floor, onto a platform which spins the pallet while shrink wrapping it in plastic. The forklift then moves the shrink wrapped pallet of boxes into the trailer which will be used to transport it to market. The berries have to be quick-chilled before the truck driver closes his rear trailer doors and takes off. To quick-chill the truck load, a powerful air-conditioning unit and large fans are employed.

My job on the line was to unwrap stacks of new cardboard boxes and mark them with a labeling gun. I then put the boxes onto a belt which carried them to where they were packed with the pint containers of berries.

Sometimes it got a little challenging to keep up the pace on high volume days when there were a lot of berries to process. If I got a little bit ahead on my work, I had to use a pallet jack to move a pallet of emptied berry trays out of the way of the work line.

Before I started this job I had no idea what to expect. I didn't know what was coming. My advice for anyone who's going to work in a packing house is, *Expect to be on your feet and prepare for a long summer!*

*Continued next page.

The blueberry packing house, continued

**Editor's note: Even though the load will travel in a refrigerated trailer, called a reefer, the berries have to be chilled before they go into the trailer. The refrigeration unit in the trailer isn't strong enough to cool the berries down quickly. It's the rapid chilling that takes place in the packing house, which increases the berries' shelf life so they arrive at the market still fresh.*

**MWO file photos on this page were not taken at the packing house where Guillermo worked.*

**Guillermo is a pseudonym.*

