

Working Bodies: A Photo Essay on Tulare County Citrus Workers

A Senior Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science

By

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June 2017

Introduction

Many a times, when people think about their food, they think about origins. Where did it come from? Was it hygienic? Were the animals treated humanely? They seldom include the workers in their thought process, though the workers of the Ag industry provide what is arguably a vital part of the Ag industry. They do back-breaking labor in often lethal conditions for little pay (NFWM). The families of these workers often suffer economically, physically, and emotionally. In Tulare County, one of the top Agricultural counties in the country, the agricultural worker is often below the poverty line (Taylor, 2015). They often live in subsidized housing and likely lack access to proper healthcare. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, six out of ten farm workers were here undocumented. This often presents issues of unreported inhumane treatment of the workers. This project will explore the lives of the citrus workers, their stories, and the inadequacies they often live through while helping sustain an ever-growing population.

Purpose

The main purpose of the project is to educate the general population and to remind the Agricultural industry about the humanity of the laborers. Additionally, the purpose of this project is to increase advocacy and empathy for the laborers. Inactivity on behalf of the United Farm Workers Union has left these workers without a voice and representation. This project is important because the agricultural worker is often forgotten, yet provides a vital part in feeding the world. The end-goal is to create an impact and bring change to an industry and better the quality of life of the laborers. In doing so, this project seeks to affect the workers, the farm labor contractors, and farm and ranch owners. The author's intention is to help make the agricultural workers' lives better and to educate others about a population that is often forgotten. While the workers are often forgotten, they provide an important service to the Ag industry that needs to be acknowledged. If the general population is educated on who these people are, it will become easier to gain advocates for the rights of the workers. By providing an intimate look into the lives of the workers and their experiences the designer gains to evoke compassion and empathy for the workers and in the process, provide a better life for these people.

Methods

After gaining access to a field, the author chose a photoshoot before noon, for better lighting. The author took as many photos after getting permission from the entire 40-person crew. When the crew finished for the day, the author was able to speak to 15 individuals chosen because of their willingness to talk to the author. The author was able to get quotes for the essay, and the decision to keep the individuals' names was made after obtaining permission. The author translated the quotes from Spanish to English and kept both for the essay. After obtaining the data, the author designed a format for publication that was easy to read and follow by the target audience, which was chosen as the general population of California. The author designed and published a twelve page booklet and printed using University Graphics Services (UGS). The final product was presented to a group of 15 people at Cal Poly's MultiCultural Center.

Findings

Throughout the process, the author encountered obstacles that were unforeseen. One of the greatest obstacles, was the reluctance to talk and be photographed by individuals. Their reasoning varied, from privacy reasons, to fear of their information being used to submit an immigration report for deportation purposes. The individuals who were speaking, did so with positivity about their jobs and futures. The author found herself very emotional throughout the process of putting the project together. The author also found that the images chosen on the basis of what emotion were evoked, were images that others were able to relate to. When presented, people were shocked to learn of the group of people who pick their food and of the struggles they often went through because of their jobs. It was often hard for the author to remain objective, considering that both of the authors' parents work in the citrus industry. However, the emotional connection to the project allowed the author to choose material that would help others make a similar emotional connection.

Conclusions

There are few to no statistics available about people's knowledge of the farm-to-fork process. While the trend in grocery shopping is to question where food comes from, the questions are usually about nutrition and whether a product is organically grown. In the author's opinion, if labor was a considerable issue to the consumer, we'd see a push for labeling on products that indicates whether ethical labor was used. The author hopes to educate the general population on the group of people who quite literally feeds them. The reactions recorded by the author indicate that the publication serves an educational purpose, as well as an artistic purpose.

Recommendations

The author recommends that this type of project also be implemented via digital format. Printing costs can add up, and the quality of the images is often reduced on print versus digital format. A digital format will also increase the viewership of the project, considering that the views for printed editions are limited to the number of copies printed. A digital format also allows for an easier continuation of the publication, since redesigning a template wouldn't be necessary. The author also recommends expanding the project to include other areas of agricultural labor, not just one specific type of worker. California has many types of crops, and just as many types of workers. Awareness and education should not be restricted to one specific group.

Works Cited

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- Taylor, Dennis. "'Working Poor' on the Rise in Tulare County." *Visalia Times-Delta*. N.p., 22 July 2015. Web. Jan. 2017.