



# FARMWORKER JUSTICE NEWS

www.farmworkerjustice.org

www.harvestingjustice.org

Volume 24, No 1

Fall 2008

## Farmworker Justice and EarthJustice Challenge EPA on Pesticides

By Shelley Davis

In July 2008, Farmworker Justice and its partners filed two lawsuits challenging the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) decisions to allow continued use of two extremely harmful pesticides: endosulfan and diazinon. The first is an insecticide in the same family as the notorious DDT, and poses significant risks to farmworkers and children as well as endangered species. The second is an acutely toxic organophosphate insecticide, derived from World War II era nerve gas, which is harmful to the human brain and nervous system.

Farmworker Justice and Earthjustice brought the endosulfan case on behalf of farmworker, health and environmental groups: the United Farm Workers; the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO; Pineros y Campesinos del Noroeste; Alaska Community Action on Toxics; Beyond Pesticides; Center for Environmental Health; Natural Resources Defense Council; Pesticide Action Network, North America; and Teamsters Local #890. (PANNA v. EPA, 08-CV-3542-MHP).

The diazinon lawsuit was brought by Earthjustice, Farmworker Justice, and California Rural Legal Assistance on behalf of United Farm Workers; Pesticide Action Network North America; Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United); Beyond Pesticides; Teamsters Local 890

*continued page 2*

## Immigration/Labor Legal Victories

By Marni Willenson

Farmworker Justice has scored two recent victories in the courts.

Our case with the United Farm Workers (UFW) against the Department of Labor (DOL) has scored a major victory in Freedom of Information Act litigation. We filed the case in response to the DOL's persistent failure to fully and promptly disclose information about employers' applications to participate in the H-2A agricultural guestworker program. The case also challenged their unjustified refusal to provide fee waivers for the information to non-profit organizations providing a public service.

*continued page 2*



Photo credit: Kevin Connors

SELECCIONES DE LAS NOTICIAS DE JUSTICIA CAMPESINA  
ESTAN DISPONIBLES EN ESPAÑOL.  
¡BUSQUE ADENTRO!

### WHAT'S INSIDE

FJ & Earthjustice Challenge EPA on Pesticides	1
Immigration/Labor Legal Victories	1
AgJOBS/H-2A Update	3
Sofia Joins the FJ Family	3
National Farmworker Law Conference	4
FJ at US Conference on HIV	5
Adapting HIV Prevention Programs for Latinos	5
7th Annual Winetasting	6-7
Spreading the Word	8
Respiratory Health Issues	9
Interview with FJ Board of Directors Chair Humberto Fuentes	10

**Combined Federal Campaign.** Farmworker Justice participates in the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC). Federal employees may make tax-deductible donations through the CFC to support our work on behalf of farmworkers. FJ appears on the CFC National List of Organizations. Our identification number is 10778. Thank you.

## **FJ and EarthJustice Challenge EPA on Pesticides**

*continued from page 1*

(Salinas, California); Farm Labor Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO; and Luis Garcia Lopez, a California farmworker. (United Farm Workers v. U.S. EPA, 08-03595- SBA).

### **Endosulfan: Already banned in Europe**

Approximately 1.38 million pounds of endosulfan are used in U.S. agriculture annually. It is applied on numerous crops including cotton, apples, pears, melons, cucumbers, squash, celery, apricots, peaches, plums, cherries, tomatoes, sweet corn, sweet potatoes, broccoli, blueberries, strawberries, almonds, walnuts, peppers, eggplants, carrots, and tobacco. By contrast, endosulfan use is banned entirely in the European Union and more than 20 other countries. It has also been nominated for inclusion in the Stockholm Convention which prohibits use of toxic chemicals worldwide.

Endosulfan is a persistent, bioaccumulative pesticide. In the short-term it can lead to: headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, tremors, lack of coordination, difficulty breathing, convulsions, coma and death. Long-term neurological effects can include hyperactivity, deficits in learning and memory, and permanent brain damage. Endosulfan has also been identified as an endocrine disrupter which is associated with effects such as low sperm production and increased risk of miscarriages.

It is also a potent environmental toxicant, harming fish, birds, bees, earthworms, and other beneficial insects. A recent federal study found that U.S. national parks from Texas to Alaska are contaminated with endosulfan in amounts that threaten ecosystems. This pesticide travels such long distances that it has been found on Mt. Everest. It can also migrate to the North and South Poles on wind and ocean currents where arctic communities have documented contamination.

Under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA), EPA can only limit or prohibit the use of a pesticide if it finds that the risks of the pesticide's use outweigh the benefits. The EPA found that endosulfan's benefits outweigh its risks even though there are effective substitutes which are only modestly more expensive than endosulfan itself.

One glaring omission in the EPA's risk-benefit assessment was its failure to consider harm to children. A 2007 study found that fetuses exposed to endosulfan in the first trimester of pregnancy had a significantly greater risk for developing autism spectrum disorders. This chemical also poses risks to school children in agricultural communities where it has been detected in unsafe levels in the air.

*continued page 3*

---

## **Legal Victories**

*continued from page 1*

In August, we secured a settlement of all claims, providing for the release of all requested documents, the waiver of all fees, as well as an award of attorney's fees and costs. Victory in this FOIA litigation will facilitate continued oversight and monitoring of the DOL's activities in relation to the H-2A guestworker program. Farmworker Justice and the UFW were represented in the lawsuit by the Public Citizen Litigation Group as well as FJ staff attorneys.

Secondly, litigation against the nation's largest forestry labor contractor, Superior Forestry Service, Inc., has continued, and we have secured a series of victories in recent months. In *Rosiles-Perez v. Superior Forestry Service*, Farmworker Justice, Southern Poverty Law Center and the Virginia Justice Center represent a class of approximately 3,000 H-2B forestry workers who were systematically underpaid and subjected to a fraudulent wage payment scheme.

In June 2008, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals denied the defendant's request to appeal the district court's class certification, which means that the case will continue as a class action for trial. Also, in September, the district court held defendants in contempt of court for violating a protective order that prohibits defendants and their agents from talking to workers about the lawsuit and coercing them not to participate. As a remedy, the court suspended the statute of limitations, provided an additional period of time for workers to join the case and pursue their claims, ordered additional notice to workers about their rights in the lawsuit, including in meetings with their lawyers, and awarded attorney's fees and costs. The defendants are facing the heat and will be attending a settlement conference in December.

Farmworker Justice continues to assist farmworker organizations and legal advocates in other cases in courts and administrative agencies. •

## FJ and EarthJustice Challenge EPA on Pesticides

continued from page 2

### Diazinon: Unsafe at home, unsafe in the fields

Diazinon, which was banned from home and garden uses in 2000 to protect children, remains in widespread use in agriculture. Farmworkers exposed to diazinon can suffer muscle spasms, vomiting, diarrhea, confusion, dizziness, seizures, and death. Long-term exposure is also linked to damage to the liver and pancreas, diabetes, and non-Hodgkins lymphoma (a form of cancer). Infants and children are especially vulnerable to diazinon, which can interfere with growth and development. Monitoring has detected this pesticide in the air near schools at unsafe levels. Diazinon is also the most commonly detected pesticide in surface waters and is implicated in numerous bird and fish kills. Almost 20 years ago, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that diazinon threatened the survival of numerous threatened species. Diazinon is used on a wide variety of crops including apples, blueberries, broccoli, cherries, cranberries, pears, spinach and tomatoes.

Both lawsuits contend that these two pesticides violate FIFRA (the pesticide law) and the Endangered Species Act, and seek injunctive relief prohibiting further use of these products. •

## AgJOBS and H-2A Update

By Adrienne DerVartanian

Farmworkers in America continue to face an immigration crisis. Most are undocumented and the Bush Administration's emphasis on raids and other harsh enforcement measures is taking a heavy toll on communities across the country. Farmworkers are being pushed further into the shadows and are suffering a corresponding loss of bargaining power in the workplace. The result is an intolerable situation for workers and the public alike.

In our last newsletter, we reported on the Administration's proposed changes to the H-2A temporary agricultural guestworker program – changes that would be devastating to both US workers and foreign workers. Not only does the Administration's H-2A proposal actively harm both U.S. and foreign guestworkers, it also fails to address the reality that the majority of farmworkers already in the United States are undocumented. Farmworkers and many agricultural employers continue to support the AgJOBS legislation (Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act, S. 340/H.R. 371) as the effective and humane solution to immigration and labor problems in agriculture. AgJOBS would offer many undocumented farmworkers the chance to earn legal immigration status and would revise the H-2A agricultural guestworker program in a balanced manner.

Working with the United Farm Workers, we have been looking for legislative solutions to stop the regulations. At press time, however, no successful legislative strategy had yet been reached and it is unclear what schedule Congress will have going forward. We also have been facilitating media coverage of the Administration's plans on the H-2A program to make the public aware of these plans. We expect the Administration to issue the final regulations shortly and will be prepared to take steps to prevent the regulations from going into effect.

For more details about AgJOBS, the H-2A program and the Administration's H-2A proposal, please visit our webpage at <http://www.farmworkerjustice.org/Immigration.htm>. •

## Farmworker Justice Staff

**BRUCE GOLDSTEIN**  
Executive Director

**SHELLEY DAVIS**  
Deputy Director

**LORNA N. BAEZ**  
Office Manager

**ADRIENNE DERVARTANIAN**  
Staff Attorney/Policy Analyst

**JENNIFER MARIA FREEMAN, PhD**  
Capacity Building Assistance Coordinator

**KATTRINA HANCY, M.P.H.**  
HIV/AIDS Specialist

**BARB HOWE, M.A.**  
Communications Coordinator

**PAMELA RAO, PhD**  
Migrant Health Specialist/Research Analyst

**AMERICA ROJAS**  
Administrative Assistant

**VIRGINIA RUIZ**  
Staff Attorney

**STEVEN MOORE SANCHEZ, M.A.**  
Development Coordinator

**MIGUEL VÉLEZ, M.A.**  
Public Health Specialist

**BARBARA VODAPIVC**  
Administrative Assistant

**MARNI WILLENSON**  
Staff Attorney/Litigation Coordinator

**JAMES B. LEONARD**  
Volunteer Attorney (part-time)

### Contact Us

Farmworker Justice  
1126 16th Street, NW, Suite 270  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-293-5420

[www.farmworkerjustice.org](http://www.farmworkerjustice.org)  
[www.harvestingjustice.org](http://www.harvestingjustice.org)





## Adapting HIV Prevention Programs for Latinos

By Kattrina Hancy

What began as an idea over a year ago finally became reality this past July in Santa Ana, California: Farmworker Justice piloted our training on adapting the Popular Opinion Leader (POL) HIV prevention program for the Latino community.

This training complements the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) original POL training by providing additional information for community-based organizations working in the Latino community. In writing the new curriculum, Farmworker Justice drew upon its experience adapting and implementing the program with farmworkers in Vista, CA and MacAllen, TX from 2003 to 2005. Working with Dr. Kurt Organista of University of California at Berkeley, we designed the training to provide practical guidance on aspects of the POL program that need to be adapted to the Latino population and how an organization can effectively make those changes.

The July training had 12 participants from health departments and community groups in southern California. A second pilot took place on October 3, 2008 in Naples, FL. Farmworker Justice is currently making revisions to the curriculum so that the CDC can make it available for broader use nationally. •



On 21 September 2008, Kattrina Hancy (HIV/AIDS Specialist at Farmworker Justice) ran the ING Philadelphia Half Marathon as part of Team Farmworker Justice. Also representing the FJ team were Levi Barclay, Megan Lan, Lauren McCullagh, Marc Asch, and Nick Wolf. All members received custom-made Farmworker Justice shirts which they proudly sported on the day of the race. Team Farmworker Justice is planning on making a repeat appearance at the 2009 ING Philadelphia Half Marathon next September, so watch for them!



Brenda Thompson, Kattrina Hancy, Rebecca Fronberg, and Odessa Dubose enjoy the closing reception of the HIV Prevention Leadership Summit held at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History in Detroit. The conference brought HIV prevention planners and program implementers together to focus on HIV prevention at the national, state and local level. Kattrina Hancy presented a poster that illustrated ways that capacity building and technical assistance can increase the success of CDC-sponsored HIV prevention programs.

## Farmworker Justice at the US Conference on HIV/AIDS

By Jennifer Freeman and Miguel Velez

The United States Conference on HIV/AIDS is the largest gathering of professionals working in HIV/AIDS prevention and care in the country and Farmworker Justice public health specialists Miguel Velez and Jennifer Freeman were there to talk about how to adapt HIV prevention programs for migrant workers and their families.

Miguel explained the unique circumstances of agricultural workers in the HIV epidemic and discussed innovative programs to help health care providers more effectively reach them.

Jennifer gave a presentation on adapting the Popular Opinion Leader prevention program for Latinos using a curriculum developed by Farmworker Justice called Young Latino Promotores (YLP). YLP is an example of how HIV prevention programs written for one demographic can be adapted to more effectively suit the needs of another. Few prevention programs currently being promoted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were originally tested with Latinos, and none were originally tested with migrant farmworkers. Farmworker Justice's work in this area fulfills a unique need within the HIV prevention field. •

*You're Invited...*

**to Farmworker Justice's 7th Annual Socially Responsible**

*Wine Tasting*



**When:**

Wednesday, December 3, 2008  
6pm-8pm

**Where:**

AFL-CIO Headquarters  
815 16th Street NW  
Washington DC

This fun event encourages consumers to drink wines produced at wineries where the vineyard workers are offered decent wages, benefits and working conditions, and have a meaningful voice at work through a collective bargaining agreement. It also teaches companies that decent treatment of farmworkers is good for business.

The Farmworker Justice Socially Responsible Wine Tasting offers novices the opportunity to learn the basics about wine and connoisseurs the opportunity to try wines that could gain a place in their wine cellar. People on all budgets find choices for everyday drinking and for those splurges on special occasions.

**The wine tasting is also a great opportunity for you to support the important work of Farmworker Justice.**

**Please become a Sponsor of the Wine Tasting. Sponsorships are available at the levels of:**

- **Premier Cru \$2,500**
- **Harvester \$1,000**
- **Cultivator \$500**
- **Taster \$250**

Financial sponsors will be identified in the invitation to the wine tasting and the event program (unless you ask us not to) and will receive 10 tickets, 6 tickets, 4 tickets and 2 tickets, respectively.

Individual tickets are \$80.

Donations are tax deductible to the full extent of the law as Farmworker Justice is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. (The first seventy-five dollars of each donation is not tax-deductible for those donors who attend the event.)

You may send a check to:  
Farmworker Justice  
1126 16th Street NW, Suite 270  
Washington DC 20036

Or donate online through our PayPal account:  
[www.farmworkerjustice.org](http://www.farmworkerjustice.org)

**Yes, we'd like to promote Farmworker Justice by being a sponsor of the 7th Annual Socially Responsible Wine Tasting at the following level:**

- Premier Cru at \$2,500
- Harvester at \$1,000
- Cultivator at \$500
- Taster at \$250

Enclosed is a check to:  
Farmworker Justice  
1126 16th Street, NW, Suite 270  
Washington, DC 20036

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name & Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Supporting Organization (if any)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address

\_\_\_\_\_  
City, State, Zip

\_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email Address

- I can't sponsor, but I'll buy \_\_\_\_ individual ticket(s) at \$80 each, totaling \$\_\_\_\_\_.
- I can't sponsor or attend but here is a tax-deductible donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_.

# Spreading the Word: Farmworker Justice Interactive

By Barb Howe

This year, Farmworker Justice is taking our message of justice for our country's agricultural workers to a wider audience. Our new Communications Initiative is designed to educate lawmakers and the public about farmworkers' issues so that we can have an even greater impact in our efforts to help farmworkers improve their lives.

Last spring we launched our new, cutting-edge, interactive website Harvesting Justice ([www.harvestingjustice.org](http://www.harvestingjustice.org)) and have joined a growing community of online activists raising awareness of farmworkers' and immigrants' rights. We're also using online social networking tools to spread our message to an ever-more-inter-connected audience. With these new tools, we can keep you updated as never before!

The foundation of our new online initiative is our blog, which is designed to complement and enhance, not replace our traditional website. While [Farmworkerjustice.org](http://Farmworkerjustice.org) is a great place to learn about our work and mission and download helpful materials, [HarvestingJustice.org](http://HarvestingJustice.org) provides regular updates of news and commentary on a variety of farmworkers' issues. Our posts have been reprinted on [The Huffington Post](http://The Huffington Post) and [The Sanctuary](http://The Sanctuary), [www.promigrant.org](http://www.promigrant.org), the newest and perhaps already the most well known group blog on immigration reform.

We've also integrated [HarvestingJustice.org](http://HarvestingJustice.org) with other social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook.

Twitter.com is a micro-blogging service in which users can post updates of no more than 140 characters. These brief updates can be sent as text messages to followers' cell phones (or you can just follow us on the web). Want to know what we thought of that article on guestworkers that appeared in the paper this morning? Most likely we'll have a one-line response on our Twitter feed as soon as we read

it. (We might also post a longer response on our blog). Or get action alerts and notifications about what's happening on Capitol Hill. Follow us at [www.twitter.com/FarmwrkrJustice](http://www.twitter.com/FarmwrkrJustice).

Are you a Facebook fan? We're there too! Join us by doing a search for "Farmworker Justice" on Facebook's "Causes" page (<http://apps.new.facebook.com/causes> note: you must be logged in). We post announcements and links of interest to keep our members updated. You can even donate to us through our Facebook page and invite your friends to join too.

You can find links to both of these social networking sites and a few others on our blog. Check us out! Welcome to the new interactive Farmworker Justice! •



---

Lideres Campesinas de California, a farmworker women's organization, is honoring Farmworker Justice as an "Outstanding Padrino" at its "Celebracion de 20 Años de Movimiento de Campesinas," in Riverside, California, on November 8, 2008.

FJ has long collaborated with Lideres Campesinas on health promotion and empowerment of farmworker women. We deeply appreciate this recognition.

# Respiratory Health Issues for Agricultural Workers

By Pamela Rao

Many substances found in the agricultural setting can lead to respiratory problems, including pesticides and other agricultural chemicals, plant and animal waste products, dust, and a variety of industrial compounds.

Work-related respiratory diseases for agricultural workers include asthma, bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, silicosis and asbestosis, respiratory infectious diseases including tuberculosis, avian flu and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and respiratory cancers. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates that work-related respiratory disease and malignancies comprise about 70% of all occupationally-related deaths.

Agricultural respiratory disease often goes untreated and unreported, especially by small operations not regulated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), making it nearly impossible to determine the true extent of the problem. Respiratory health issues can be difficult to prevent and treat because a given illness can have numerous causes, while exposure to a given toxic substance can contribute to a wide range of health problems. Also, workers are unlikely to have been exposed to only a single identifiable substance at any given time. On the other hand, since many of these exposures can be avoided or managed, certain respiratory diseases among farmworkers are preventable.

## Pesticides

Most attention regarding farmworkers' respiratory health has been focused on pesticide exposure. The various means of exposure to pesticides go beyond working directly with the toxic chemicals. Workers can be exposed to residues on plants and chemical drift into untreated areas. This creates hazardous working conditions for all agricultural workers regardless of individual activity.

Many pesticides are known to cause irritation to the respiratory tract. Some pesticides can cause sensitization in susceptible individuals; once an individual has become sensitized to a chemical, very small amounts of exposure can cause serious health problems.

Prenatal and early childhood exposure to pesticides is being investigated as a contributing factor in the increasing number of cases of childhood asthma worldwide. This is an important consideration for farmworkers due to the documented issue of the "take-home" pathway that exposes children of farmworkers to pesticide residues in their homes. Children can also be exposed to pesticides prenatally if women engaged in agricultural work are not adequately protected when working in treated fields while pregnant. This can cause a variety of negative health effects for the infant.

## Asthma

Asthma is another concern in agriculture. Many substances found on farms are known contributors to either occupational asthma or work-aggravated asthma. Occupational asthma results from causes and conditions encountered only in an occupational environment; work-aggravated asthma refers to pre-existing asthma exacerbated by workplace exposures. Pre-existing asthma is likely to be exacerbated by exposure to dust and other substances in the agricultural workplace.

## Avian Flu

In recent years, public health officials have focused attention on the risks posed to human health by the current worldwide outbreak of avian influenza, also known as bird flu. When the avian flu virus affects humans, it has a very high death rate (over half of infected individuals). People become infected through contact with bird litter (droppings), sick or dead birds, or contaminated surfaces. Signs and symptoms in infected people are similar to those of human flu, and include fever, cough, sore throat, eye infections, muscle aches, pneumonia, acute respiratory distress and other severe and life-threatening complications.

Poultry workers are on the front line of risk for avian flu because they routinely handle live or sick birds. These workers typically get covered with bird litter or dust in the course of the day, and workplace hygiene is often poor. In these circumstances, the workers could become infected through contact with bird droppings or contaminated surfaces. Workers who then come home covered by bird litter or dust could easily spread the infection to their family members. As such, they need to be explicitly considered in federal, state, and local plans for preventing and/or handling an avian flu pandemic. •

### For More Information:

Beyond Pesticides: Asthma, Pesticides, and Children: What you should know to protect your family. Washington, DC: Author. [www.beyondpesticides.org/children/asthma/asthma%20brochure%20high%20res.pdf](http://www.beyondpesticides.org/children/asthma/asthma%20brochure%20high%20res.pdf).

Pesticide Action Network North America: Secondhand Pesticides: Airborne Pesticide Drift in California. San Francisco, CA: Californians for Pesticide Reform. [www.panna.org/files/secondhandDriftAvail.dv.html](http://www.panna.org/files/secondhandDriftAvail.dv.html).

Farmworker Justice: Health and Safety Resources. <http://www.fwjjustice.org/Health&Safety>. Includes clinical fact sheets and patient education brochures on avian flu.

National Environmental Education Foundation. Health and Environment Publications (webpage). Includes links for documents on pediatric environmental screening and environmental health practice and education guidelines for medical and nursing professionals. <http://www.neefusa.org/health/pubs/index.htm>.

# Humberto Fuentes: Growing up in the Migrant Stream

During the spring of 2008, I had the privilege of interviewing the Chair of our Board of Directors, Humberto Fuentes, who grew up in a family that relied on farmwork. Many know him through his extraordinary career as an activist for the rights of farmworkers, especially during the heady days of the 60s and 70s, but you might not know much about his roots. His childhood exemplifies the hurdles that children of farmworkers faced and sometimes still encounter today.

--Barb Howe,  
Communications Coordinator, Farmworker Justice



Chair of FJ Board of Directors Humberto Fuentes talks with Steve Sanchez  
our new Development Coordinator

*“I don’t think things are any different now. You come to work.  
You don’t come to rely on anyone else.”*

*Humberto Fuentes*

When Humberto Fuentes was growing up, he worked in the fields, with his parents, hoeing sugar beets. They were paid by the acre. The work was brutal but they did it—all of them, even the children—because they had to. “Education,” he explained “came second. It was something that you did whenever you had the time. Survival was more important.”

Mr Fuentes, a pillar of the farmworker rights movement in the United States, is a natural story teller. I interviewed him when he was in town recently for an FJ Board of Directors meeting. He has a kind grandfatherly face and a gentle smile. When you meet him, he’ll give you a warm handshake and maybe tell you about his kids or grandkids. You would never know that here was someone who helped shape one of the greatest social movements in our country’s history.

That is, not unless you catch him reminiscing with someone else caught up in the heady days of that time period, Gene Ortega. Both men are on FJ’s Board of Directors and when I met up with them to do the interview with Humberto they were drinking Coronas, laughing and talking about the “old days”. They mentioned Jorge Gonzalez, Jose Angel

Gutierrez and someone named Lalo de Coalo—names completely unfamiliar to someone who was not even born when they were changing the world!

I wanted to hear more about what it was like back then, what it must’ve felt like to be hanging out with the likes of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, how things were different now and what hope they had for the future but my assignment was specifically NOT to cover these usual topics. Everyone knows about those days, my boss told me. What I want to hear is stories about his childhood. What did he experience as a youth before he became a lifelong farmworker activist? So that’s what I asked him about.

Born in the little town of Cruillas in the state of Tamaulipas in Mexico (about 100 miles from Brownsville, Texas), Humberto’s father would cross the border regularly to find agricultural work in the U.S. In 1952 his family moved here permanently to settle in a small town in the Rio Grande Valley. From there, they joined thousands of other families who traveled across the country, following the crops northward to places like Idaho, Washington and Oregon as part of the Northwestern Migrant Stream.

*continued page 11*

## Humberto Fuentes: Growing up in the Migrant Stream

*continued from page 10*

Kids growing up in families that migrated faced special challenges that U.S. school systems too often did not take into account. Moving and adjusting to new schools several times a year, not to mention missing days or weeks while traveling, makes it very difficult to get a steady education. Humberto's stories of his early education reflected that tough reality.

"It didn't matter what age you were, there was always an incentive to drop out, especially for teenagers" he said. "You'd go in and out of school for a long time". He said children in farmworking families had to repeat grades and fell further and further behind until eventually they'd drop out.

And it's not necessarily that they're not doing well in school despite the circumstances. Older kids in families facing dire economic circumstances often wanted and needed to go to work full time to help out. Mr Fuentes' story is a perfect illustration.

"I was a very good student," he says. "And I still remember my sixth grade teacher." When he was in the middle of sixth grade his teacher told his parents that he was working so far above his grade level that if Humberto could stay and finish out the rest of the school year they'd recommend he skip the seventh grade and go straight to eighth.

I can see in his eyes the pride he felt as a child as he tells this story. He was thrilled at this possibility and begged his parents to let him do it. They did. His family arranged for him to live with an aunt while they went up north for work. He would have to join them later during the summer, though, because they needed the money.

"But agriculture," he explains "is nothing if not unpredictable and it turned out that that year my family was three weeks late returning home in the fall. Three weeks. School had already started when they took me back home. It was too late. They said I had to go ahead and do the 7th grade." I can imagine how this must've felt to a little kid, filled with raw pride and acute sense of injustice. He had worked hard, was smart and tested high enough for the eighth grade. It wasn't fair that the administrators hadn't followed through on their promise.

So Humberto dropped out of school and went to work full time.

At age 22 he got drafted but in a strange stroke of luck he was not sent to Vietnam because back then—in 1964/65—"if you had less than a year [of high school] they didn't send you." So he served his military term in San Antonio while he worked on his GED.

"I was a boxer in the military, on the team so I got my own room. Did basic training in California, then was in San Antonio for two years."

He still did agricultural work and met his wife Hortencia in the migrant stream. They were married in Idaho and settled for awhile in Oregon. "I wanted to finish school," he said, so in Oregon he enrolled in community college.

"I wanted pilot training," but the counselors at the school discouraged him—why was this farmworker kid thinking he could fly planes? They urged him to become a welder instead. Nonplussed by the prejudice of his teachers and counselors, Humberto decided to study industrial electronics instead.

Meanwhile he also became a counselor helping to recruit other farmworker kids to continue their education and it was in this capacity that he met Cesar Chavez. Humberto soon ran into trouble at the school for "organizing" and was fired. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) provided him with a lawyer to sue the school and amazingly they won but to settle the matter he agreed to leave Oregon. He was ready for life's journey.

It would take him through many years of farmworker activism and major contributions to the development of the Latino community in this country. We are very fortunate to have his active involvement in Farmworker Justice.

You only have to talk to Mr. Fuentes for a minute to realize that one of his most noticeable characteristics is his compassion for others. Even in telling his own story, he is telling the story of thousands of others who endured similar circumstances, growing up in a society that routinely dismissed and discriminated against kids whose parents had to migrate in order to survive. •



Farmworker Justice plays a leadership role in advocacy for migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the nation's capital. For twenty-six years, FJ has been helping empower farmworkers to improve their wages and working conditions, labor and immigration policy, health and safety, and access to justice.

Our work depends on you! Please help Farmworker Justice continue and expand its work by making a financial contribution.

**Thank you very much.**



**I would like to support Farmworker Justice in its work to help migrant & seasonal farmworkers.**

Enclosed is my tax-deductible donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_. Please place me on your mailing list.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax No: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

You may donate with a credit card online at [www.farmworkerjustice.org](http://www.farmworkerjustice.org) or send a check to: Farmorker Justice, 1126 16th Street, NW, Suite 270, Washington, DC 20036.



1126 16th Street, NW, Suite 270  
Washington, DC 20036



NON-PROFIT  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT NO. 2174  
WASHINGTON, D.C.