



Rural Youth Power

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In North Carolina tobacco fields, farmworkers face long hours and dangerous conditions. Their farmworker children have begun to speak out.





Tobacco fields command a quiet beauty.

The leafy crop lines the country highways of eastern North Carolina in a sea of verdant green that ripples when a breeze cuts through the humid air. The combination of raw blues and greens electrifies.

This juxtaposition struck me the first time I saw it up close. I grew up in the North Carolina Piedmont, in a suburb closer to cigarette factories than the fields from which the cash crop grows. I had never considered the green leaves of tobacco, each one the size of a giant, floppy elephant ear, naturally bunched like bouquets. I had only seen photographs of dried tobacco leaves the color of rust, its history muted along with its hue.

North Carolina is home to a \$70 billion agricultural industry, the fourth largest in the country behind California, Florida, and Texas. Tobacco, despite its decline, is still big business. In 2012, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention calculated that farms in the U.S. produced nearly 800 million pounds of tobacco, ranking fourth in the world behind China, India, and Brazil. In 2015, tobacco companies spent \$8.9 billion marketing cigarettes and smokeless tobacco in the U.S. This amount translates to more than \$24 million each day, or about \$1 million every hour.

Tobacco is a finicky crop. The leaves must be picked by hand, a job left to many of the nearly 150,000 farmworkers in North Carolina. Like the rest of the country, these workers are overwhelmingly immigrants—72% of the U.S. agricultural workers are foreign-born. In eastern North Carolina, where tobacco is predominant, many of the workers are children—some as young as six years old.

According to the documentary *Uprooted Innocence*, almost half a million children are working in fields in the U.S. While the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 sets the minimum working age at 14, the law allows children ages 12–14 to work in the agricultural industry as accompanied minors or with parental consent.

Current data does not reveal exactly how many youth work in American fields. But the exemption to the legal minimum working age can be traced back to the idea that American family farmers employ their own children to help out.

But this tradition is more convoluted and deeply complicated today. The romanticized family farm does not reflect our modern reality. Instead, a child labor law ages unfettered for 80 years. The hands that pick our crops remain tied to a cycle of repression and injustice.

TOXIC CHILDHOOD

Eddie Ramirez says he was twelve years old when he first started picking tobacco, but he remembers working the fields when he was ten. His family is from Honduras; he was raised in eastern North Carolina. I last saw him in 2014. He was fifteen years old, smiling as he strolled through the hallways of the U.S. House of Representatives, knocking on office doors with other farmworker youth who were lobbying for policy to change, to get kids like them out of the fields and into better opportunities.

Ramirez told me then that he never had a summer break. Instead, nearly every hot, humid summer morning, he would wake up at 4 a.m., slip on a thick, long-sleeve T-shirt and board a school bus with his mother in Snow Hill, North Carolina. The bus would be cramped with up to forty migrants on the way to work in a tobacco field.

Alongside his mother, Ramirez would hand-pick tobacco for shifts up to twelve hours on his school holidays and sometimes during the school year.

The year I met him, Ramirez was among 141 youth farmworkers featured in a report released by Human Rights Watch (HRW), documenting child labor in tobacco fields in the southern U.S. Eighty children come from North Carolina, with the rest from Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia.

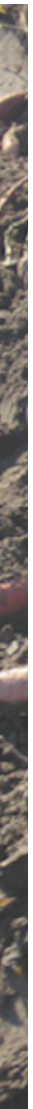
The 138-page report, *Tobacco's Hidden Children*, reveals the dangers and harmful conditions of tobacco work. It emphasizes

that the U.S. lags behind Brazil and India, the top two tobacco producers in the world, who have banned children from working in their fields. (The report has not been modified since 2014. My coverage of the report and Ramirez's story was published in *The Guardian* that same year.)

The U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act does prohibit anyone under sixteen from working in conditions deemed hazardous, but tobacco has not been qualified under that criteria.

Yet raw tobacco, despite its almost-regal beauty, is dangerous. Green Tobacco Sickness is a common nicotine poisoning caused by handling wet tobacco leaves. It is a toxic and potentially fatal illness. Workers typically arrive to the fields by 6 a.m., when the dew is fresh. Damp green tobacco leaves emit dangerous amounts of nicotine.

Ramirez told me that he and other teenagers experienced symptoms of GTS: burning eyes, nausea, dizziness, vomiting, and headaches. Young bodies are more susceptible to contracting the illness. I've witnessed some signs in camps that warn, in fine print, of potential symptoms, but employers are not required to provide protective gear for their workers. Ramirez said he wears his own shirt and hat. Many workers cut arm holes into plastic garbage bags to wear for extra protection.



“We’re young kids. There are hundreds of kids working out there trying to help their families,” Ramirez told me in 2014. “We got rights to talk about how we feel. The companies might not know that young kids are working out there.”





INNOCENCE LOST

I first wrote about young farmworkers in 2012. I met students from NC FIELD, a nonprofit organization in eastern North Carolina that works with farmworkers, and their off-shoot youth group: Poder Juvenil Campesino (PJC), or Rural Youth Power. Most of the youth I met are now adults, immigrants themselves, or children of immigrants.

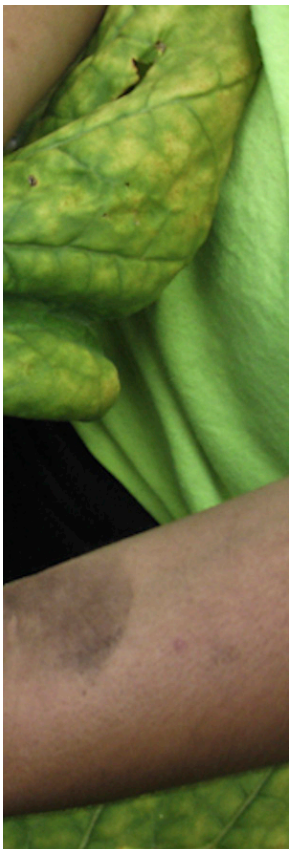
All of PJC's leaders are youth farmworkers, or children of farmworkers. Current director Yessy Bustos, for example, grew up picking fruit in Texas.

At the first PJC meeting I attended, the words of a young undocumented woman from Guatemala struck me: "You wish to be like any other kid, to be a teenager. But you never have that opportunity. I just want to be somebody."

She was fifteen years old and already a mother. She left an abusive home life to live with a family she met through NC Field. Despite working in tobacco fields all throughout high school, she made honor roll every year.

A couple of months later, I wrote about more Human Rights Watch research focused on sexual abuse targeting farmworkers. A few of the women I met at PJC confirmed their stories were told within the report, *Cultivating Fear: The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the U.S. to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment*. At the time, about a quarter of farmworkers were female.

"Farmworker women can feel utterly powerless in the face of abusive supervisors or employers, and with good reason," a HRW researcher said



in a 2012 release that accompanied the report. “The abusers often repeat their actions over long periods of time, even after some workers complain.”

The report highlights sexual abuses ranging from verbal harassment to groping to rape. Other issues include unfair compensation, well below minimum wage. A female farmworker in North Carolina reported she had worked an eight- or nine-hour day and been paid only \$34, less than \$4 an hour.

At that same PJC meeting I met another young woman, Milly Lima, who used her name and shared her story openly. She traveled to Raleigh in November 2011 to speak at an immigrant rights event—as well as directly to North Carolina Department of Labor Commissioner Cherie Berry—about the sexual

harassment she says she experienced at ages 13 and 14 by her supervisor in Eastern North Carolina. When she reported the issue to the head contractor, she, her mother, and grandmother, all working in the same field, were fired. She says two young girls at the same camp were being offered as prostitutes to the same supervisor.

“I thought it was OK for the contractors to treat their workers like that,” Lima told me then, at age 16. “I was younger, I didn’t understand. But even an adult would get yelled at for no reason. That adult, they wouldn’t speak up.”

Lima also told me at the time that she had been sprayed twice by pesticides while working in the field. She had never received safety training regarding pesticide exposure. She was told to get an over-the-counter medication for a rash and continue working the next day. This month, doctors discovered an inexplicable fluid in her brain that requires surgery.

Lima has not let these adversities silence her.

“I know that we have the right to actually speak up. Even though I’m a citizen, when I speak, I speak on behalf of all the Hispanics, with or without papers,” Lima told me. “I speak on behalf of them because I consider myself uno de ellos. ‘Cause I am. I am one of them, always will be.”

FINDING A VOICE

Estefany Bonilla is a current member of PJC. She never worked tobacco, but her parents did. She did spend two years in the fields tugging out pigweed from soybean fields, starting each day at 7 a.m.

“They were literally my height or bigger,” says the four-foot-nine 17-year-old of the weeds. “Sometimes they were covered in fire ants. They were really rooted in deep, so you would have to struggle.”

At 15, she developed detrimental back problems from the work.

“The sun I could handle. The heat—fine. But having to bend over, picking and such. It was a lot,” she says. “I would lay down and cry and cry over it.”

Despite the law not changing, PJC and NC FIELD fearlessly stand up for themselves and their families. Lobbying continues, as do direct relationships with other, bigger nonprofit organizations, like Human Rights Watch, and various university research departments.

Expression is an important form of activism for the youth. My friend Peter Eversoll, a Durham-based photographer, has spent several years leading photography workshops with PJC and other youth who represent the myriad communities in our food system. He’s taught them how to explore nuanced storytelling along with basic techniques, from catching the most delicious light to waiting for the action shot. Above all, each glimpse captured

expresses the youths’ desire to use their photography as advocacy.

I once emailed Eversoll about why he thinks photography works as a medium for the youth, to which he wrote back: “We’ve talked about how photographs bear witness to history and have played a key role in social change over the last 150 years. Think Lewis Hine and child labor, Emmett Till and civil rights, to more recent events around police brutality and international conflicts. The primary thing is to get folks thinking beyond the selfie and the snapshot—not that there is anything wrong with them. But we want to be more intentional about how we create images and what purpose they might serve.”

Through her work with NC Field, Bonilla earned a scholarship to Guilford College. She wants to be a journalist. Through the support of umbrella organizations and existing groups, youth are able to thrive and flourish through their own empowerment. The youth of PJC are growing more than just our food—they are growing their own futures.

“There’s a lot of things that people don’t know because they’re not informed about it,” Bonilla says. “This has definitely opened up a passion I didn’t know I had inside of me, to advocate for these people and their rights. There are so many underrepresented people in the world. Everyone deserves the right representation. Everyone has a voice and it should be heard.”

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To learn more about PJC and NC Field, or to support the organization, visit ncfield.org.