

Harvests of Shame

Proposal for an updated version of the groundbreaking 1960 documentary

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It has been more than 45 years since Edward R Murrow's powerful report *Harvest of Shame* highlighted the plight of migrant workers in America. Considered by many to be the most important news documentary in TV history, *Harvest of Shame* set a standard that has been long lost in the juggernaut of today's media consolidation and consequent loss of gravitas.

Today, with the divisive issues surrounding illegal immigrants, an updated *Harvest of Shame* can cast a new light on this problem, delving into the problem beyond the current acrimonious debate, looking at it's root causes and giving it a human face for all to see.

Daring to challenge both government and agribusiness, Murrow and his producer, David Lowe, set about to highlight the plight of farm laborers in rural Florida, some of whom worked for as little as a dollar a day. The film shocked viewers with its stark images of desperate poverty and the callous greed of the big growers.

Harvest of Shame was made in an era when questioning the established order of things too vigorously could lead to a subpoena from the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and possibly a spot on some secret blacklist or even a jail sentence. In many ways, things are not so different today.

In 1960 the exploitation of farmworkers in America wasn't a secret but in 2005 the exploitation of American children in farmwork is.

Today, backbreaking farmwork is part of life for some 400,000 to 500,000 children in the U.S. and over a hundred million children worldwide. The same poverty that drives children around the world into work also continues to push generations of American children into a similar life of hard labor. Migrant children travel with their families throughout the United States to work in agriculture. They journey from state to state, from one farm to the next, following the crop harvests. They toil, day in and day out, to help their struggling families survive.

We have tens of thousands of children every year working in agriculture in America that are not subject to our Fair Labor Standards Act. A child ten years old can't work at MacDonald's. A child under eighteen in America cannot work in hazardous occupations. But in agriculture? If you're working out in the hot sun picking peppers or tomatoes, you can be ten years old, subject to insecticides and

pesticides and everything else. They can work you ten hours a day, seven days a week. They have no protections. And that is legal in America today. And it's unconscionable

- SENATOR TOM HARKIN

It is time for a new Harvest of Shame. A Harvest of Shame that focuses on American children.

Over the past dozen years I have produced, shot, directed and co-directed documentaries that deal with children's rights and economic justice around the world. During that time I also established strong ties with groups such as the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs here in the United States. I now want to turn my cameras on to the fate of farmworker children here in the US. Most of these migrant child laborers are American citizens, born in the United States. Their parents, who were children of migrants themselves, came here dreaming of a better life. Unfortunately, things have only gotten worse.

During my time at The University of North Carolina when I came to deliver the Frank Porter Graham Lecture I met with local activists and students and faculty and discussed with them the idea of working to develop another Harvest of Shame. The response was overwhelmingly positive. UNC-Chapel Hill, the Duke Documentary Center, and North Carolina would be an excellent base for developing such a program. North Carolina is the #1 user of the H2A Farmworker Guestworker Program; the Latino population is the fastest growing in the country and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) just won a contract with the Mount Olive Pickle Company, a three-way contract between farmworkers, cucumber growers and Mount Olive. This is extremely significant because it is the first time guest workers have won such protection.

I would like to explore the development of Harvests of Shame with you. Ideally I envision a film and advocacy campaign along the lines of Stolen Childhoods that chronicles the lives of children in three migrant families across the US, examines policy failures and looks at best practices.

Migrant children are forced to leave school for the fields as early as April to pick vegetables up north. Often, they don't return to school until October even November. Even when they return to school, migrant farmworker children struggle to catch up with their classmates.

A sack of onions weighs sixty pounds. A full sack can be worth as little as sixty cents – a penny a pound. A family of six, working ten hours, will average less than two dollars an hour in one of the most dangerous occupations in America. While most parents want a better life for their children, a typical farmworker in the US earns less than \$12,500 a

year-much less than the federal poverty line for a family of four and hardly enough to live on. As a result, parents are faced with a difficult dilemma: keep their kids in school or send them out into the fields. Year after year, faced with the prospect of falling further and further behind, many children become discouraged and stop attending school altogether. In fact, experts estimate as many as 65 percent of migrant children end up dropping out of school.

My hope is to see my children study and have a profession, so that they don't spend their lives the way I have spent mine, so that they don't have to struggle to survive from day to day.

- JÉSUS PEREZ

For migrant children in the US, the workday begins at 6 a.m. and ends at 6 p.m. For this backbreaking work they are paid as little as a penny a pound. There is little time or opportunity for the usual summertime activities that most American kids take for granted. After returning home from work, they eat dinner, take a shower, and go to bed to rest up for yet another 12-hour workday. Rarely do they get a day off.

In many cases, child farmworkers must endure sweltering temperatures, as there is little shade to shelter them. Among the many dangers children face on the job are pesticides. Migrant children regularly labor in fields that are sprayed with these toxic chemicals, which can cause skin irritations and breathing difficulties, and their small, undeveloped bodies are especially vulnerable. Child farmworkers are exposed to the same pesticide levels as adults, yet children aged three to fifteen are three times as likely to develop cancer as a result.

It is shocking to note that 20% of all farmwork fatalities in the U.S. are Children.

We go through a lot of danger with pesticides, we have airplanes spraying pesticides over our heads. They just – we're out in the field and all of a sudden, here comes the airplane throwing all the pesticides at us. It's pretty dangerous out there, ...

-DORA PEREZ CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

So I would tell President Bush to put his hand to his heart and look out for all of us – all Hispanics, migrants, who spend their lives contributing to the prosperity of the United States.

- JÉSUS PEREZ

Migrant kids are very close to family. They feel responsible for helping the younger brothers and sisters. They feel responsible for helping mom and dad. They do what needs to be done to survive and they do what needs to be done because it's work that needs to be done.

- ELLEN TREVINO