

# FROM THE GROUND UP

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# SAF

STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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Check out these photos of the 2005 Into the Fields Internship taken by SAF Documentary Intern Carmela Meehan

## Focus on Documentary



Left 2005 SAF Intern Reynaldo Sosa, from the University of South Florida Right SAF Intern Lupe Huitron interviewing a worker during his time off photos by Carmela Meehan

## Oral Traditions In the Fields

by: Carmela Meehan, 2005 SAF Documentary Intern

For the past seven years, Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF) interns have been teaming up to document the cultural traditions and skills of farmworkers in North and South Carolina. These projects celebrate numerous traditions, and give farmworkers a chance to share a sense of pride and value in their culture. The project also enables SAF interns to form meaningful relationships with workers and address injustice by sharing what they have learned with the wider community.

During the summer of 2005, SAF summer interns set out to document the oral traditions of farmworkers they met. They found singers, cooks, net weavers, and healers who learned these traditions orally, continue to practice them far from home, and are passing these traditions on to their families. By paying particular attention to the oral traditions of their subjects rather than focusing on them as just workers, interns were reminded that farmworkers are "people with dreams, interests, and aspirations" (Rocio Rangel, 2005 ITF Intern).

Interns with a family history of farm work had an intense experience of self-discovery. Intern Joslyn Wiley recalled: "During the interview, it finally hit me that by talking to this woman, I was not just learning about a particular cultural tradition important to one woman and her family - I was also gaining insight into the history of my family and how it has changed over the generations." Interns who did not have a background in farm work gained insight into these discoveries by collaborating with the interns who did.

Through the documentary projects, interns and their subjects built strong personal relationships with one another. Both interns and workers were empowered by sharing and recording traditions that otherwise might be forgotten. This newsletter focuses on a few of these incredible stories. ☀

"Sometimes documentarians forget how much influence the work they do has on themselves. Documentary work is just as much about self-exploration as it is about exploring the outside world."



SAF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.

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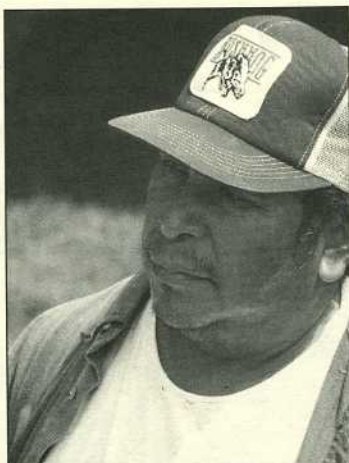
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Left Portrait of Melchor Right Melchor's son helping in the fields photos by Morgan Gregson

## Melchor Tomás:

### Life, Struggle, and Tradition of a Latino Farmer

by: Walter Ramirez and Morgan Gregson, 2005 Interns, Rural Advancement Foundation Intl.

A humble but proud man who stands a little more than five feet tall, Melchor Tomás is transitioning from farmworking to farming, and is sharing his knowledge and tradition with his own children and grandchildren.

As a boy in Mexico, after Melchor's father passed away, he worked in the fields alongside his grandfather and brothers. Over the years, he developed an appreciation for working the land that he would carry across time and borders.

Melchor told us that in 1984 "decidí cruzar el Rio pero fue mala suerte." After being caught by immigration he was sent back to Mexico. It would be a year before he would make his second attempt at crossing the border. He eventually became established doing farm work in North Carolina where his family came and met him.

Melchor now rents 100 acres of land in Western North Carolina and grows a variety of vegetables on 80 of those acres. He does not employ any workers; instead his family comes together to support the farm. Some days even the young grandchildren are alongside Melchor in the fields, being exposed to the techniques Melchor uses when he farms.

Farming may be difficult and at times risky, but Melchor loves being in the fields. He works hard every day of the week but he told us, "...de mi parte el campo yo siento como que si mi mente esta abierta y desarrollada, asi abierto pues no se como explicarme, porque si estas trabajando dentro es como se estas cerrado, la mente no - y el campo yo siento...sera que me gusta trabajar libre..." The freedom Melchor feels when he works keeps him persevering through the difficult times. ☀

"I looked out at the workers in the fields and then at Melchor and thought about how they're out there all day, every day. As I thought about the work, and the heat, and their struggle, I heard Melchor's words.

- Morgan Gregson

"En el transcurso de la entrevista, nos dimos cuenta que la familia de Melchor es muy unida, y que todos colaboran con las tareas del campo." - Walter Ramirez



"I think we've succeeded in building a relationship with Max, which to me is one of the ideal goals of the type of documentary work we've been doing this summer."- Noah Raper

## Por la vida que nos ha brindado:

### The Pilgrimages of Maximiliano Calva

by: Rosie Rangel and Noah Raper, 2005 Interns, Natl. Farm Worker Ministry

"...One night the Virgin Mary appeared in his dreams; he felt he had to get closer to his spirituality and decided to organize this pilgrimage..."

**Pilgrimages** can prove to be life-altering events, and help pilgrims to discover more about themselves and their beliefs. Maximiliano Calva, a farmworker from Pachuca, Mexico, working in Louisburg, North Carolina, began organizing a pilgrimage in his home community which has become an annual tradition of great importance.

To Max this pilgrimage is "como un agradecimiento por lo que hemos logrado y mas que nada por la salud." To him, the pilgrimage means a sacrifice he makes to say thank you to God and the Virgin for another year of life and another year of strength to support his family.

Today Max estimates that about 80 to 100 of his fellow community members participate in the pilgrimage to see El Señor de Las Maravillas each year, each with their own personal reason for making the pilgrimage. The journey takes them through the *cerros*, big hills that constitute the dominant landscape in this region of Mexico.

Due to the large number of people who participate, the pilgrimage now takes fourteen hours, and still more people have become organized to house and provide showers for the participants. This pilgrimage, launched by the dream of one young man several years ago, has become a tradition for his family and many members of his community.

This is not the only pilgrimage which Max completes, however. Each year, Max and thousands of other Mexican men from villages, towns, and cities throughout the country undertake a collective pilgrimage, a journey of sacrifice and hardship to the farms, orchards, and fields of North Carolina. The objects of this pilgrimage are work and money: long hours of work in the fields which are a sacrifice for their families, and wages which enable their families to continue to live. ☀



**Top Left** Portrait of Max **Top Right** Image from Max's pilgrimage t-shirt photos by Noah Raper. **Above** Pilgrims along the road toward El Señor de las Maravillas photo by Maximiliano Calva.

"Sometimes I get so immersed in farmworker issues that I forget they're not just an issue. They're people with dreams, interests, and aspirations. Even though I came from that background, I have to remind myself that they are more than a cause, they're human beings."

- Rosie Rangel



