

CAS Podcast: Migrant Farm Workers

Richard Gay, Editor: Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes we'll give you something interesting to think about. I'm Dr. Richard Gay, Interim Dean of the College and with me is Dr. Ashley Allen, Interim Associate Dean.

Ashley Allen: Hi everyone. Today we will be discussing migrant farm workers in Southeastern North Carolina. Migrant farm workers are individuals who move from place to place, who are employed in agriculture, and typically live in some type of temporary housing. There are approximately 3 million migrant farm workers working in the US at any given time. These farm workers are essential for our agricultural community, yet they are a marginalized group within the U.S. In addition to working in one of the most dangerous industries in the U.S. they are also at a heightened risk of physical and mental illness, discrimination, and isolation. Today we have two of our faculty whose research focuses on social class and poverty. These faculty also co-taught a service-learning honors course designed to educate our students on the life of migrant farm workers in Southeastern, North Carolina.

Richard Gay: So let me introduce our listeners to our guests. Dr. Michelle Fazio is a professor of English at UNCP and a Faculty in Residence at the Esther G Maynor Honors College. She recently received a Board of Governors award for Teaching Excellence. A prolific scholar focusing on the working class, she is a charter member and past president of the Working Class Studies Association. Also we have with us, Dr. Brooke Kelly, Professor of Sociology and Assistant Chair of Sociology and Criminal Justice. She is a recipient of UNCP's Outstanding Teaching Award and publishes on poverty, income inequality, and food insecurity. And finally, in addition to our faculty, we have the rare privilege of being joined by one of our UNCP students today, Jessica Nunez. Jessica is a junior history major and member of the Esther G. Maynor Honors College. She is currently in our very first cohort of REACH Scholars. REACH is a program funded by the Mellon Foundation to diversify higher education by investing in students who will be applying to graduate and professional schools in the humanities. It's a pleasure to have you all with us and welcome to 30 Brave Minutes.

Allen: Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us today. So, I'm just going to start us off with a few questions. First, for Drs. Kelly and Fazio. I would love for you to tell us a little bit about your research interest, how you became interested in working with migrant farm workers, how that might overlap with your research.

Kelly: So, I'll go ahead and start. This is Dr. Kelly. I started working, doing work with farm workers when I was a graduate student. As a graduate student I had a research assistantship with a multidisciplinary interstate longitudinal study called the Rural Families Speak, and the purpose of that study was to track the well-being of rural low-income families over time, across different states. We had 17 states that were involved at different times in that project and I worked in Michigan where I was at graduate school at Michigan State. One of the groups that we worked with, the families that we interviewed in Michigan were migrant farm workers. Actually, we were the only state that had migrant farm workers in our sample. So doing that work and doing those interviews over several years really made me aware of the real experiences of farm workers. And that became part of my dissertation research. I did a dissertation on rural low-income mothers and the work that they need to do to get and keep their jobs. So that became a piece of my dissertation research later on. So that's how I became interested in the real circumstances that farm workers face.

Allen: Wow, so you've been doing this since your graduate school days? Dr. Fazio, do you want to give us a little run-down of your research and how it led you to work with migrant farm workers.

Fazio: Very similar to what Dr. Kelly just shared, I studied immigrant and working class literature. It is related to my dissertation work, and when I came here to Pembroke, I was really intrigued by moving into this rural space and I studied working class lives. I focus on lived experience and it became very clear with having such a large student body that came from a farming background, paying attention to what I was seeing while I was traveling to and from campus, and I was like, there is a real story here about work and invisible work, invisible labor and I think our work really speaks, or like the focus on immigration and working class culture and history really applies to this region. And so it was really easy for me to build on my dissertation which seemed more about ethnic literature, but apply it to real world ethnic groups. And I also come from an immigrant working-class background, so their stories resonate with me because my family did do day labor work and it took my family a long time to acclimate into the system, so to speak. So I think paying attention to workers lives is really important to me because it shapes every aspect of who we are.

Gay: So Dr. Fazio, how did you and Dr. Kelly realize that you had shared research interests?

Fazio: I had to think hard about this question because I've known Brooke for so long, I'm like, it really was hard to figure out, but I think we first served on the social justice committee. I think, I believe that's when I first met you and you know, it's a testimony to the wonderful colleagues

that we have on campus because we just started to speak each other's language. We recognized that we had the same ideas and interest about inequality and social justice, so it became easy for me, as a junior faculty member, to really align myself with Dr. Kelly and just find out how we could work together. We thought about proposing a course and we applied for a grant to the Teaching and Learning Center. And again, a wonderful resource for our campus really gave us a lot of opportunity to flesh out some ideas to see what would work and what wouldn't work and I think that was one of the really great experiences that it, nothing was perfect the first time around and even the third time of teaching the class, we're still learning, but that was the original idea. It came out of a social justice committee, which we are both still on and continuing to find ways to connect service with our research and teaching.

Kelly: And just to add on that, I think I remember that we connected through Service Learning, too, early on. We worked with Dr. Debbie Hanmer, Dr. Fazio and I and three different disciplines had a common, clear series that all three of us in three different classes, that were taught separately, worked on. Dr. Fazio created a WordPress account, and we had our students respond to other students in other classes. We were starting to try to figure out and think through how we might work on some interdisciplinary teaching in some way with a common project like that. So that's how we started and then we had Ramon Zapeta come and speak. He's a former Sociology grad at UNCP and now he works with Student Action with Farm Workers in Raleigh. And that was an organization that we connected with through our speaker's series. He came to speak and they showed a film called Harvest of Dignity, which was actually a follow-up on a film that was made in 2012, which was a follow-up on a film Harvest of Shame which was in the 1960s that looked at the circumstances that farm workers faced. And as somebody who had done work with farm workers years before on my dissertation, I was just completely struck at how the conditions, and they actually feature conditions of farm workers in North Carolina, in that film. It's available online if anyone wants to check it out. It's a good film. So I was struck by, in watching that, about how, wow, this was years ago that I did my dissertation in Michigan and that research, and it doesn't look like it's any different, doesn't look like it's any different in North Carolina. And at that point, Dr. Fazio looked at each other and were like we got to do something about this, right? We got to do something. And so think that was one of our sparks for trying to do this common class here and centered on farm workers.

Gay: Give me the name of the class because I'm thinking people are going to be very interested after listening to the podcast. So could you give us the name of the class and then tell us a bit about how you went about designing it together.

Kelly: Food, Social Justice, and Inequality. That's our focus in the class. That's the name of the class as we teach it as an honors seminar. How we structure the class. So we've taught this class a few times now. It's interesting to think back and reflect back on how the class developed and how we started and what we did. And I think we kind of realized after a couple takes that we would be more effective if we start with a sociological perspective and give them a sense of what that disciplinary perspective is and sort of a way to ground it. I start off by giving them a sense of what it means to look at things sociologically and how to look at our food system from a sociological perspective, how the individual choices that we make have, are influenced and we're nudged in different ways by the way our food system is structured, so I give them that sort of orientation. And then Michelle comes in and talks about some of the literature and we can teach them how to analyze that literature from a sociological perspective using some of those principles that we introduced early on. So that's kind of how we've, I think, evolved in approaching the class.

Fazio: I would just add that it really it's a good way to structure interdisciplinarity. At times it was confusing, I think, for students to understand how that all works, but when you get the sociological principles up front and then you start reading literature and then you apply those social concepts to the problem, it then created a really good framework to then enter into Service Learning. Because sometimes you can just walk into what you think you're doing is like service or helping a community partner, but if you don't have the groundwork, it doesn't connect the content to the service. So we really tried over the course of three times teaching this to give the students that kind of framework.

Chancellor Robin Cummings: This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy, and passion, driving our region forward. Our commitment to Southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. With your help. We will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at uncp.edu/give. Thanks again for listening. Now back to more 30 Brave Minutes.

Allen: What kind of assignments were involved here? For being a service-learning class and an honors class? What were you doing?

Fazio: The usual assignments of, you know, tests and papers, critical responses, but you know, we really wanted the students to be involved with defining their own service learning projects.

So giving them the kind of freedom and innovation just to come up with their own idea, to apply the concepts that they've been learning, and to see, like how they could use their major to apply, or to advocate for migrant farm workers. So that assignment, you know, really I think enriched the kind of analysis of literature and sociology that we were having them do because they were really thinking outside of the box and we were interested mostly in them seeing how their future working lives could apply to advocacy and community engagement. So we have assignments like students wrote grant proposals for a mobile health clinic for farm workers. It was coming out of students who are in biology and chemistry and you know, you don't think that that link happens but that's interdisciplinarity, you know, so they were learning, you know, about public policy and how to apply these, you know, their concerns to their work, visit a labor camp. So Dr. Kelly and I worked hard to create partnerships with local nonprofits and one of them was Episcopal Farmworker Ministry. So our students left campus, we felt strongly that they then experience that, not as a voyeur, but like to give and to understand what it's like to work with a vulnerable population, maybe to feel that kind of vulnerability, leaving campus and walking into someone's living quarters, you know, so it really, when you think about what you learn in a textbook and what you learn experientially, it really brought the point home of what we were trying to convey about how overworked, oppressed, and exploited these farm workers are, and their families. So, when we visited the labor camp students, they brought food. We had done a clothing and toiletry drive, so students became really involved with what does it mean to raise awareness on campus and in their own communities and then bring it to the very people that need it the most. Also it was really remarkable to see our students so poised and professional and kind in their interactions, and respectful. So we did that, but we also managed to have a lot of fun with the workers. We played soccer, I brought my ukulele and we played songs. And at one point I did some yoga with the Farm Workers. So, it really was showing our students that we, too, are involved with this kind of service. It's not just we're assigning this project to you, but that we live and breathe this and I think, you know, when Jessica chimes in she will add to it, but I think it really created an important experience for the students but also, as an educator, this is what it's all about. You know, I could teach the textbook all day, but that's not what's going to make this class memorable for students and then have such lasting impact on their careers outside of UNCP.

Allen: Yeah, Jessica anything to add about your experience from the student's perspective?

Nunez: Um, yeah, I mean just like, Dr. Fazio said, something I really enjoyed about the class is that we're not just reading all this literature about a topic. We're also getting to see it in real life, which completely changes your conception of, like, the subject matter at hand, because I feel like, a lot of times in classes we'll talk about like, what's wrong with agrarian structure in

society, but they don't really give us the time to think of solutions for that structure or like the issues. And this class really did that. It not only gave us the time, but, sort of, the encouragement to do that. Like I've never in a class had to actually reach out to people to try to establish, like some sort of connection. Like me and my two partners, for our service learning project, we're trying to establish an event on campus for the children of migrant farm workers, and we wanted them to come to campus and sort of be inspired by education and aspired to actually go to college. And in order to do that, we have to reach out to organizations. We have to write grant proposals. We have to do a lot of things that I never have to do in other classes, and it most of it that was actually doing things in the real world, like not just in the classroom, and so that was really different, and to me, was really social justice at its finest, because we're identifying issues in our world but also addressing them with action, which is something a lot of classes don't incorporate into their class.

Gay: So sounds like it's a wonderful opportunity and as I said, I think it would be something that would be inspiring for future activism on behalf of other populations. And it also seems like it would connect, I think it would myself, it would connect me emotionally to the population that I'm learning about and experiencing things with and that creates a different set of ties. So how did her experience sort of relate to the goals of the class? It sounds like she took a lot away from that.

Kelly: Yeah, I mean, I actually, you know, just for reference to remind myself I pulled up, I was like, what were our learning objectives? Examining possibilities for addressing social problems through social change and social movements; improving oral communication, writing, and critical thinking skills. And I think some of what Jessica was talking about particularly speaks to that, that you know, doing this real world kind of stuff really gives, that's one of the things I love about Service Learning is that, you know, you can see light bulbs click with students when they realize that, oh, this is real, you know. So it develops these skills that normally you wouldn't get in a class. And you know developing civic engagement experience in service-learning, I think that we certainly saw that in a lot of our students, especially Jessica and some others, too, how they have developed a sense of interest in doing social justice work in the future, as Jessica said, and so we also have some learning goals about giving them grounding and literary analysis and a sociological perspective. So I definitely see with Jessica, certainly, and some of our students exceed our expectations in terms of learning for sure.

Nunez: I will also say that it does become very personal at a certain point as well because it's disturbing to learn about the inequalities and discrimination that are set by these farmworkers, and myself as a Hispanic student and knowing that a lot of these workers are Hispanic, it

becomes even more personal because I was ashamed at first when I went to the class because I didn't know about any of this stuff and I thought like how can I not know about something that impacts my own community? And so it really strengthened this sense of responsibility that I have, knowing that I have the privilege to even be in college in the first place, but also to have the time to look at these things and look at agriculture at the macro level and identify all these patterns and say like, okay this exploitation is not just at one camp, like one labor camp. It's something that can be seen nationally and even globally, I'm sure.

Allen: I just enjoy listening to you and I know that, Jessica, you have sort of taken this a little bit farther now, right? And in terms of your own personal research project, so would you mind sharing just a little bit about what you're doing with that?

Nunez: Of course. My ultimate goal for my research project that I'm doing right now under the Mellon grant is to create an interactive physical and virtual exhibit. I want it to focus on our current cultural moment right now with Covid 19, and really look further into how Covid 19 has impacted farm worker exploitation. My goal is to compare past and present images of labor conditions and to really exemplify the limitations of the farm owners and them enacting safety measures for the workers themselves. I mean, there's so much protective equipment that's necessary, but you may not be able to afford it. Some owners aren't even required to let people know about outbreaks on their own camp and so they could be working and not know that others are infected and the list really just goes on and on. There's no paid leave if you get sick, so they're kind of encouraged to continue working. And so these are the things that I want people to see in my exhibit and in terms of how the class has impacted my exhibit, it definitely gave me that ambitious mindset of reaching out to people because that's something I did during the class and that's something I'm doing right now as well, just reaching out to archivists and organizations about talking to farm workers. So I'm using all those skills from the class to create this exhibit that I'm doing right now.

Allen: That's great. I'm excited to see your exhibit when it's finished. And I know that you're going to be featured on the REACH website in September, which is exciting. So hopefully people can go check that out. I did want to ask. I know you guys have taught this a few times now. Is there anything, are you teaching it again, first of all, is that in the works? Because I'm sure the students who listen to this are going to be like, oh that sounds like a great class. How can I get into this sort of class situation? But what would you change? Is there anything you're going to change?

Fazio: I hope we'll teach it again. We usually offer it in the spring because it coincides with National Farm Worker Awareness Week, which is the last week in March. So we like to offer it then, so maybe, Dr. Kelly, we should be thinking about this. But in terms of changing, I think one of the frustrations, I could speak for myself is how do you manage content with experience? Because it is service learning, we want our students to have that kind of experiential learning, but sometimes content has to be sacrificed. In looking forward I am wondering how I can incorporate more grant-writing proposals as actual assignments as opposed to a reading analysis of a common read. I want our students to have these kind of experiences and leave with a product so they can put that in their portfolio to say, it might not have gotten funded but I did write a 20-page grant proposal for Migrant Farm Worker Justice. It comes like a nice material item they can leave campus with, to say I've done this kind of work. I'm ready. There was a real world issue, it wasn't make-believe. So I'd like to find more assignments that are rooted in professional development and the kinds of skills that we want our students to graduate with. So that might mean we don't have an exam or have one less reading assignment because you need space to think and reflect. And I'm also thinking about ways that we could move the service learning project up front and not just, like maybe meet with the workers a few times, just so students can understand like it's not just a one-time meeting, even though like Dr. Kelly and I have worked on these relationships, I think students seeing the migrant farm workers when they first arrived, when they're in the midst of the season, and when the season is tapering off, you get a really different sense of who they are as workers, how alienated they are. I've seen them during that different timeline and it's really striking. They arrive really hopeful they're going to make money for their families and then to the point of the end of the season, the despondency, you know, they're being criticized by local communities for being Mexican migrants. And you know, there's one thing I always try to impart to my students, that these workers are a part of America's workforce. They are part of a work visa program. They're not illegals and yet they're treated like they don't belong here. So this raises a host of questions about racial and ethnic and tolerance class inequality, you know, and how we want to embrace the mission of our University. Well our farm workers fit right within that trajectory and this is a good way to apply those concepts because in the workplace, you will be in a diverse workplace, right? So we need to practice what this really means.

Allen: Anything to add, Dr. Kelly?

Kelly: I like all of Dr. Fazio's ideas. And I think you know, I'm listening to you talk and thinking about how, you know, I'm teaching a service learning class right now. And I'm was remembering when I was working on it that it seems like students always say, I wish we could have started earlier on the project. So figuring out how to do that, I think is a you know, a

worthy way to kind of try to figure out how to shift but it's a constant sort of shift and re-configuring with a lot of things going on in the class, but I mean, we should probably talk to Jessica and some of our former students, too, for feedback.

Gay: Always a great idea to listen to our students.

Kelly: Yeah.

Gay: A very valuable source of information. So, if there's one takeaway that you want our listeners to know about migrant farm workers, Dr. Kelly, what would that be today?

Kelly: I think that the main thing, I mean, we can talk about all of the details, and I could tell stories about my experiences with some of the families that we interviewed over a number of years, but I think the main takeaway is that they exist. Unfortunately, we live in a, and there's various ways that we talked about in the class, reasons why, not just farm workers, but like sort of where our food comes from is sort of invisible to us. Like there are, and we talked about in the class that there are you know surveys of elementary school children. When you ask them where does milk come from and they say the grocery store? They don't know it comes from a cow. Right? And so we have you know, our food system is very amorphous and I, forever, you know, when I go to a produce section and grocery store, like I think about the hands that picked that fruit, but I think most of us probably don't in various ways and there's reasons why that is the case. So the takeaway I would have is that, you know, farm workers exist and I could you know, I could also tell you stories about families that we interviewed, who quit school because their house burned down and they needed to take care of things and you know, that's those kind of stories are very common sort of realities for, I think Jessica mentioned, education in a lot of cases, you know farm workers typically have low educational attainment because you know, if you think you're migrating keeping up with school is a very hard thing to do.

Fazio: I would add the serious health risks that migrant farm workers face. The families and their children. I mean, I think we like to see this population as predominantly male and that's not the case. And I think if we add gender to the equation, we begin to see how women and children exist with these kinds of health risks, these low living standard they experience, and the kind of prejudice that they face. We've been working hard to get into those communities and it's been very difficult because there's a lot of laws that protect the workers and the farm owners and it's hard to navigate all that bureaucracy. But I'll just add I think it's good for students and for everyone to understand how much money is made by the work of migrant farm workers. It is a billion dollar industry in North Carolina and I think on the average we have over 150,000

seasonal farmworkers. That's a large population. And I think this kind of class gives that kind of visibility that's needed. But again, because we're in Robeson County, some of those farm workers are here and when I tell my students, you know some of whom own farms and they know they employ these workers, I mean that's a real challenge to get to those students to think critically, not to judge, not to make anyone feel guilty, but to just understand the complexities of this issue and that we are all, as Dr. Kelly pointed out, if we eat a strawberry, hands have touched that strawberry and do we understand the long history of how that strawberry arrives, you know, in our fruit salad or in the cafeteria and if we start to break that process down we know there's a lot of power relations in play.

Allen: Jessica, Do you have anything to add? I mean, from what you learned, what would be your one takeaway that you would want people to know?

Nunez: What I would say is a lot of times things can get complicated by politics and labels and the connotations we associate with those labels, like immigrant Hispanics. A lot of times working-class non-citizens, well, the list really goes on but when you strip all of that away and you look at the root of everything you realize that these are just people trying to work with dignity. They're not asking to not do the work. They're not even asking to really make the work easier. They're just asking to be able to actually do it and to be paid fairly for it. And so that simple concept, whatever has to be done to help achieve that, I think that should be the priority.

Gay: I think a lot of our listeners, and myself included, have learned a lot today from our guests. I want to thank you all for joining us and for being a part of 30 Brave Minutes today and hope you will join us again.

Allen: This podcast was edited by Ashley Allen and transcribed by Janet Gentes. The theme music was created by Riley Morton.

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