

# Mexican farm worker funds daughter's education to become a lawyer

By Julie Slack  
Special to The IFP

For six months every year, Dagoberto Cruz trades his family in Mexico for a new one in Canada.

No, it's not like it may seem—Cruz is one of thousands of migrant farm workers who spends his summers doing farm work in Canada.

In his case, he has been coming to Andrews' Scenic Acres, a popular pick-your-own farm on 10 Sideroad, for the last 16 years. Bert and Lauraine Andrews's 600-acre farm just east of Hwy. 25 in Halton Hills, becomes his new home for half a year.

The Andrews— and the 14 co-workers, ages 26 to 55 years, he spends summers with— have become like a second family to him.

Cruz, 41, considers the seasonal agricultural work he does on the fruit and vegetable farm as far more than just a job— it's a stepping stone to a better life.

A native of Tenancingo, Mexico, Cruz is working on a seasonal contract through a Canadian supplemental labour program that is recognized as the best of its kind in the world.

Cruz, whose father was also a farmer, is one of approximately 16,000 seasonal agricultural workers from Mexico, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad/Tobago and the East Caribbean who will work in Ontario's agrifood business through the program this year.

Cruz says he returns each year to work on the Andrews' farm because it gives him a rewarding job that he can't find in Mexico, allowing him to provide a much better quality of life for his wife Elia and their three children; his youngest is six.

In fact, he's able to afford university tuition for his eldest child that would not be possible if he worked in Mexico only. The hourly minimum wage in Mexico is around \$5/\$6, compared to here,



**Dagoberto Cruz**

where it's \$11.

The couple's 20-year-old daughter Nancy is in her second year, studying to become a lawyer— an education they never would have been able to afford without Cruz's Ontario earnings.

The knowledge and experience he has picked up while working on the Andrews' farm has also allowed him to run his own small fruit farm back home. He sells his goods— mainly cactus fruit (prickly pear), along with peaches and strawberries— at a farm mar-

ket near the town he calls home, located near Mexico City.

The ties between Dagoberto and Bert and Lauraine Andrews go beyond a typical work relationship. Five years ago while working on the farm he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The Andrews helped make sure he got the medical attention he required throughout his treatment and recuperation. To thank the couple's kindness during a difficult period, Cruz and his wife named their youngest daughter Laura after Lauraine. Laura was born shortly after his cancer treatments. Cruz, meanwhile, has a clean bill of health.

"I never could have paid for that at home," he said. "The insurance here covered it all. I was at St. Joseph's in Toronto for over a month."

"They're like family to me. They're very good people," said Cruz, who also serves as foreman on the job since he can easily

translate between everyone. "I'm very grateful to work here. This job allows us to have a better life in Mexico.

"Bert is a very nice person... very friendly," he added. "He's not like a boss. He's a friend."

Bert Andrews says the program also provides Ontario farmers with vital benefits. Without a steady source of reliable seasonal workers provided through the program as a supplement to local labour, many farmers in Ontario couldn't remain economically viable.

They'd be forced to stop growing fruits and vegetables altogether or move into less labour-intensive crops.

It ensures that crops are planted and harvested in a timely fashion.

Cruz said when it comes time to say goodbye near the end of October, he does it with good memories.

"This is home too," he laughed.



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