



Miguel Sandavol, Paul Brooks and Gregorio Rios-Cortes at the Brooks Farm in Mount Albert. About 1,800 migrant workers, including Mr. Sandavol and Mr. Rios-Cortes, from places like Mexico and Jamaica, work at York Region and Simcoe County farms.

STAFF PHOTO/ ERIN RILEY

Farm owner visits worker 'friends' in Mexico

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Ministry of Natural Resources. Mr. Orio is one of about 16,000 Caribbean and Mexican workers, mostly men, who work in the Ontario fruit and vegetable industry.

"It's a bilateral signed agreement between the two countries," explained Dave Greenhill, senior advisor for the foreign workers' program.

"These programs have been going on since 1966, and they've been very successful," said Mr. Greenhill. "The workers carry out the planting and harvesting the farm owners can't."

All of the migrant workers are older than 18 and each meets immigration standards. Most are married men, explained Mr. Greenhill. Their primary goal is to support their families, Mr. Brooks pointed out. "They are serious about their work and serious about why they come here."

About 1,800 offshore workers arrive every spring in York Region and Simcoe County, including the Holland Marsh. Two to four migrant workers are also placed on small farm operations in the local area.

This marks Mr. Orio's 10th year working in Ontario. Half of that time has been at the Brooks farm in Mount Albert, the rest in Leamington packing tomatoes and before that, in a nursery operation in Niagara Falls. The money's

attractive and the work conditions are good.

The Brooks farm, at the corner of Mount Albert Road and Durham Road 30, has been in the family for more than 120 years. Corn, soybean, strawberries and raspberries are the main crops.

Right now, migrant workers are concentrating on covering strawberry plants with straw to protect them from the cold of winter — and ensure when Mr. Orio and co-worker Miguel Sandavol arrive next May, there will be a crop to harvest in June.

TRIED TO HIRE LOCALLY

Finding help has been a challenge, said Mr. Brooks. "We've tried to hire local young people, but between their swimming lessons and their having to go to the mall, the work didn't get done. It became an impossible situation."

"On the other hand, the migrant workers are adults. They want to work. They like to work and they do a very good job."

It's not all sweat and toil for the migrant workers. Mr. Orio and Mr. Sandavol, 32, attend a Spanish mass at St. Elizabeth Seton Roman Catholic Church in Newmarket once a month. During the recent World Youth Days events in Toronto, volunteers escorted Mr. Orio and Mr. Sandavol and other migrant workers to see Pope John Paul II.

Jean Lashley co-ordinates social activities for the Spanish-speaking community at the Newmarket church.

As well as providing transportation to church for the Mexican migrant workers, Mrs. Lashley organizes other outings. "There's a Spanish community in York Region; the migrant workers blend in," she said.

This marks the fifth year the Brooks family has employed off-shore workers. Realizing language would be an issue, Mr. Brooks took Spanish lessons at a Newmarket high school. He also encouraged the Mexican workers to help him learn the language. Mr. Brooks is now fluent in Spanish.

Mr. Sandavol is following in his father's footsteps. A migrant worker for more than 20 years, the elder Mr. Sandavol worked on farms in Canada until 1995. Throughout most of Mr. Sandavol's childhood, he didn't see his dad for half of the year. Yes, he missed him.

But, Mr. Sandavol senior not only supported his fami-

ly well, he managed to save enough to buy a farm in Mexico. Today, the Sandavol farm is thriving. "My father owns 25 milking cows," said a very proud Mr. Sandavol.

FAMILY TRADITION

This year marks Mr. Sandavol's fourth season as an offshore worker. Like his father, he looks out for his family and like his father, he's building a tidy nest egg. Before coming to the Brooks farm, Mr. Sandavol spent three years working on vegetable farms in Quebec.

Married to Lucia, the couple has four children under eight years old. Mr. Sandavol talks to his wife and little ones on the telephone twice a week. "It's good to talk to home," he said.

As far as Mr. Brooks is concerned, Mr. Orio and Mr. Sandavol are more than workers.

"They're our friends," he stressed. "I've been to Mexico and when I go, I stay with Greg in Puebla and in the future I'll visit Miguel. We get along very well."

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