

The living room, shown on page 1, has now become the bedroom for the Cervantes family as they watch TV before going to sleep. A Flintstones poster on the wall is an encouragement to read.

PHOTO BY ALAN BORRUD

Land of plenty

A conversation and pictorial about the housing challenges and opportunities facing Oregon farmworkers

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Oregon employs between 90,000 and 150,000 farmworkers, not including their families. The precise numbers are difficult to establish year by year, because of the nature and diversity of the work. It includes not just those who work in with field crops, but people who do nursery work and tree farms, food processing, poultry farms and aquaculture.

But when the workday is done, it's far from a working class world for this diverse and economically isolated population.

Roberto Jimenez is the executive director of the nonprofit Farmworkers Housing Development Corporation, based in Woodburn. The FHDC provides housing for low-income farmworkers — the median household income is less than \$16,000.

From its early days in the 1980s, the FHDC battled the popular sentiment of segregating farmworkers in on-site camps, pursuing instead the economic, social and health benefits of building safe, stable housing within communities. Two decades later, the organization has created housing for nearly 1,300 individuals in the mid-Willamette Valley.

But that is only a fraction of those who need it. More than 500 families are on the waiting list for housing in the agriculture-heavy communities of Marion and Polk counties. There are nearly 20,000 farmworkers in Marion County alone, by state figures.

This population — the vast majority Mexican immigrants, some indigenous — is both culturally diversified and economically isolated. Nearly all live below the poverty line, in substandard housing or in homelessness. Not all speak English or



Roberto Jimenez

even Spanish — seven languages are spoken in FHDC housing.

For these workers, the challenges are many, but it's the opportunities that Jimenez focuses on. The economic and political conditions have changed significantly in recent decades, Jimenez notes. Oregon and the Pacific Northwest are final destinations for their diversity in crops and seasons, and farmworkers have never been more important to this vital local economy.

Roberto Jimenez: It has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, and it's changed in the last 10 years that I've been doing it. Prior to 9/11 in particular, there was a much bigger migrant stream. It would start in South Texas in the winter, and work its way into California for the

early spring crops, then move up to Oregon for the last spring and early summer crops in the Valley, and in the fall into Washington to harvest the apples and pears. They would come back to Oregon, work on the tree farms, and then back to South Texas. That went on for at least 50 years. After 9/11, that got shut down pretty quickly. Because, for people who were undocumented, there was an increased number of immigration checkpoints within the U.S. borders.

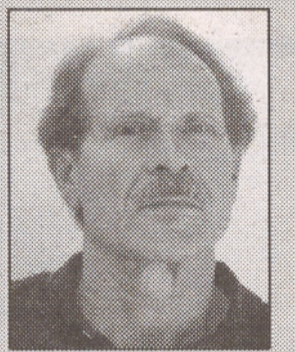
Which is not to say it doesn't exist now. It still exists, but not as big as it was. What I see in our housing population is increasingly people will come directly from their home country, to Oregon, or to wherever they're going in the U.S.

Joanne Zuhl: This change in mobility, is that indicative of why we need more family, affordable, year-round housing?

R.J.: That's true. Families are settled down for various reasons, one being immigration, one being the desire to access education for their children. But another is that Oregon is fairly unique among the big agricultural states in that it's primarily not corporate-owned farms. Large corporate-owned farms have the ability to employ a lot of people year-round. And here in Oregon, in our housing in particular, the average head of household has five different employers over the course of a year. Because growers can't house their labor year-round, they lose access to qualified labor. And while technically it's qualified as unskilled labor, it's actually a highly skilled type of labor.

The photographer: Alan Borrud

"Street Roots strives to serve an often-forgotten population within our community. I offered my services to assist in this project that showed an organization's effort to increase proper shelter and childhood education for people in its community."



"Caring for others — I just wanted to honor that with my camera. But, as is often the case when spending some time on a project, I learned as I worked with my camera. I saw good people working hard to assist others in their quest for a better life."

Alan Borrud is an experienced freelance photojournalist with a newspaper and editorial background, living in Portland. Over the years his work has included documentary work on a domestic abuse shelter, a small town high school prom, a skateboard church preacher and a Russian Orthodox Old Believer teaching in a Woodburn grade school.

See JIMENEZ, page 7