

Chasing the Harvest: A Levan Seminar on Migrant Farmworker Narratives Draws Students Together

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The idea was to organize a Levan Center for the Humanities book discussion and bring together a diverse group of Bakersfield College students to read, explore and examine an oral history collection illustrating the experiences of migrant farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley.

The result brought so much more.

In the fall semester, Professor Oliver Rosales and I co-led a Levan student seminar that was held over a span of three sessions and featured a guest visit and the work of Gabriel Thompson, author of *Chasing the Harvest: Migrant Workers in California Agriculture*. More than 60 students expressed interest for the 10 spots available. Those selected shared strong reasons for wanting to be a part of the Levan book discussion.

The book discussion centered around *Chasing the Harvest*, published by the nonprofit Voice of Witness and written by Thompson, an award-winning journalist whose research has focused on immigration, labor and organizing.

Through his oral history interviews that include farm workers, community workers, a labor leader, a grower, youth and others, Thompson seeks to shed light on the incessant problems John Steinbeck sought to convey in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the struggles faced by the Okies in the 1930s. Eighty years later, Thompson shows the problems continue.

Thompson moves to highlight key issues that plague migrant laborers in the valley. Many still endure abuse and discrimination by coworkers, bosses and even outsiders. Farmworkers continue to face low wages and unfair working conditions where exposure to pesticides has become an accepted part of the landscape. Poverty is commonplace, while many families remain separated with the breadwinner following the agricultural harvest in the United States and mothers and children hanging on to a thread of hope on the other side of the border.

Chasing the Harvest provides a compelling narrative on the intersection of labor and agriculture in the lives of San Joaquin Valley people, facing struggles, inequality and discrimination, in their search for better life opportunities.

The book is broken into chapters based on each person interviewed. Thompson spent several months in 2016 gathering evidence in the form of the narratives. His book provides appendices that

chronicle agriculture in labor in California and offer a glossary for students learning significant terms related to the subject.

As part of the Levan seminar, the students met to discuss the book and contribute different perspectives. Some students felt they understood the struggles endured by loved ones under similar experiences. Others, who did not have firsthand knowledge of the farmworker experience, felt a deeper reflection and desire to learn more. And a few questioned why more has not been done to correct the problems facing farmworkers, including an immigration system in need of reform and violation of basic human and worker rights as well as other forms of social injustice (poverty, living in fear in the shadows, sexual harassment and the list goes on).

Students also were given the opportunity to meet with Thompson, who made a special guest appearance at the seminar, and later, the students were able to share pieces of their own histories that defined their stories, thanks to the help of BC Delano campus librarian and Digital Delano Project Co-Director Elisabeth Sunby.

At the conclusion of the seminar, students were asked to share a review of the book and their experience. The following is a reflection by some of the students:

Thompson's oral history collection captures farmworkers' resiliency

Chasing the Harvest is an astonishing read. I was shocked to read and learn of the test and trials that farmworkers have to face. The women have it even harder than the men. This surprising book is an oral history with narratives that were told to editor Gabriel Thompson. People will get a lot out of this book. They will walk away knowing that farmworkers are strong and vibrant, and they have great resilience. They will read about the unfair wage theft, unsafe working conditions and whether or not the farmworkers' futures are assured any longer in this USA, the place of freedom.

Thompson is an independent journalist. He has written for the New York Times. He has won prizes for his writings about immigration and labor. Thompson has won the Studs Turkel Media Award, along with the Sidney Award. He has written five books. *Chasing the Harvest* captures stories from different people, mostly migrant workers in California agriculture. Thompson makes the point to share their different stories from a humanizing perspective.

Thompson visited our book discussion. I had the pleasure to ask Thompson a question about media literacy. I asked him if he believes that media literacy will help farmworkers expose their stories more. Thompson responded with, "Yeah, a lot has changed in the last few years. There is a lot of potential. A 50-year-old farmworker told me to get with the times; he showed me a video of him having to be misplaced by the wine country fires. The United Farm Workers connected the stories from the field. Roberto (the farmworker interviewed) used his cellphone to show the reality of the work and stories of their work using videos. The UFW has really embraced the idea of farmworkers sharing their stories on Facebook. It's a way to share their experiences with people who aren't going to ever step into the fields."

I liked the way that every narrative in the book was uniquely told and written out. The book is an easy read; I understood what was going on. This book has great human interest throughout the pages. I really enjoyed how Thompson placed an appendix, along with a glossary, so that readers could learn all the terms used in the book.

Read this book. The lessons you learn from farmworkers will help you succeed in your everyday life!

— Ivory Williams

Book brings social, cultural awareness of farmworker lives

The *Chasing the Harvest* by Gabriel Thompson book discussion and the author meet at Bakersfield College proved to be of immense social-cultural value and a mind-opening experience.

Personally, I've driven all over the spectacular state of California, and on many occasions near farm fields, I would see folks toiling away to harvest the crop. Finding a food truck nearby was always a good idea for a bite of a tasty asada and cilantro and catch of a beautiful smile from a señorita. But besides visual contact, I had no idea of what the stories and life were of migrant farm workers — or their history.

Thompson's book delved deep to bring to public knowledge and firsthand accounts of many folks involved in California's agriculture industry; the book centered on the life and work of the laborer and their family. I feel more aware and have more understanding of migrant farm workers' struggles and even insights into their stronger communities, more than we may have in any big city.

— Mark Zambon

Eye-opening experience

This book really opens your eyes to the abuses, conditions, poverty, and suffering of millions of farmworkers and their families. This book gives you an insight into what it is really like to be a farmworker in modern America. *Chasing the Harvest* lets our community have a voice and share it with others. I cried from page to page because of the treatment that people still endure in the farmworker profession. This book is a rollercoaster full of emotions. You will need plenty of tissue. I really enjoyed this book.

— Tania Bernal

Chasing the Harvest highlights adversity farmworkers face, overcome

When my History professor mentioned the opportunity to be in a discussion group for the book, *Chasing the Harvest*, I wasn't completely sure what I was in for. However, one thing I knew for sure is that I didn't really understand the plight of the migrant workers of the San Joaquin Valley. I was born and raised in Bakersfield and had many Mexican friends growing up. Yet I was blind to the agricultural labor many of their families put forth in the fields so I could enjoy the privilege of fresh produce in the grocery store. Joining the discussion group the first day was kind of awkward being in the minority. One thought kept creeping back into mind: should I really be in this group? The majority of participants were female and Hispanic. But I later found that I learned just as much from them as I did from the folks who shared their own stories in the book. These women were humble and powerful. I am thankful to have been a part of this unique opportunity, and I know it has helped me to see and understand the adversity affecting the Hispanic population in California.

The one person who stood out to me in the book was a teacher named Oscar. As a boy, he was an illegal immigrant and had to live in fear. In turn, he overcame all of the struggles he went through and used them as a platform to encourage the children of the migrants who work our fields. He never belittled the life they had or might even choose for themselves. Yet, he was also able to show them that they could do anything they set their minds to. I will remember this opportunity for a long time and hope myself to have a lasting impact on students someday.

— Christopher Brantley

Book discussion brings self-discovery

After being a part of this book group, I have learned a lot more about my culture and how much Hispanics go through for their families. This book is not only an interesting book, it is also a very eye-opening book that can make many people realize what people go through when they are illegal immigrants. These stories also help many people to be inspired to spread their voice as well as their stories and struggles. This book also inspired me to see that the people in the stories went through a lot in their lives and, yet, they either managed to get a job or even become an elementary teacher; therefore, if they were capable of doing so, then so can I.

The book talked about the struggles each person went through, but, in my opinion, there was another message being expressed in a certain way: I believe that the people who shared their stories also believed that even though they went through a huge struggle for their kids or family members, they still believed that they had a beautiful journey. Their community in their jobs are very united and caring for one another. They can happily look back at their lives and see all they have accomplished in life and all the obstacles they went through. Overall, this book was one of a kind and a must-read.

— Gabriela Poblano