

FOCUS



BRAVING THE WILD FRONTIER

BY DAISY KIDSTON

Imagine yourself rolling out of bed and wiping the sleep out of your eyes just in time to eat your breakfast by sunrise. Then, donning your grubby work clothes, you head off to yet another twelve-hour work-day, on a lettuce farm in Québec, working alongside people from Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and all over Québec.

This all took some time getting used to, especially since I was the sole anglophone on the farm — and the only one who couldn't cut a head of lettuce to save her life.

Sam wake-up calls were my routine for three months last summer when I worked for Frontier College, Canada's one hundred-year-old "volunteer-based, literacy organization", whose purpose is to extend education to all people, particularly those who may not have regular access, ability, money or time.

Though Frontier College in its earlier years mainly sent people to work and teach immigrants working on rail gangs, it has grown over the century to include: urban work, such as helping people living on the streets; helping inmates in prisons; establishing tutoring services in communities; and since 1990, farm work.

The position I held last summer was called "Labourer-Teacher". By day, I worked alongside labourers, doing anything from driving tractors to packing lettuce. Then at night I offered tutoring services and assisted those who wanted to learn or improve their French or English. I was also expected to act as a social mediator and to keep an eye on human rights, making sure workers were not being exploited by their employer.

This is the perfect summer job for those who enjoy physical

activity, working outdoors and working with people who come from all over the world and speak different languages.

Something which I was completely ignorant of was that multitudes of workers (mostly men) from all over South and Central America (mainly Mexico) come to Canada for four-to-six months to work on farms for minimum wage earnings. Though some have very good language skills, particularly men who have been immigrant farm workers for a number of years, many cannot speak English or French and as a result have a more difficult time getting by in Canada. Things that are so simple for us — like going to the bank or buying groceries — become quite a challenge for those with a language barrier.

Frontier College is an organization that is built on the foundation of basic human rights and education for all of humanity, regardless of colour, nationality, income, or location. Because this is the premise of Frontier College, I met many fellow Labourer-Teachers whose interests and studies were focused on human rights. The majority of students I met were International Development Studies students, and many could speak Spanish. Yet, there were also those like myself who could barely say "Hola!" and didn't even know Canada had immigrant farm workers.

Yet Frontier College takes great time and effort to train its employees. Last season, about 40 Labourer-Teachers went to a training camp in May near Toronto. Here we were taught basic Spanish as well as basic teaching skills. We also had workshops on racism, communication, tractor and farm safety, self-defence, anger management, and so on.

To sum it up easily, I'd say it

was a week of hanging out and discussing humanitarian issues with some hip people with broad and inspirational visions

As for my work on the farm, it too was rewarding. I worked with men from South and Central America and the northern region of Québec. We all worked on "Ferme M et M Lando", a lettuce farm owned by a pair of Italian-Québécois twins named Maurice and Mauro. Needless to say, there were four languages spoken on that farm: French, Spanish, Italian, and — when I came along — a little English.

Though I had a mind-expanding time working on the farm, my teaching services were not highly sought after. One reason for this was that my farmer could speak Spanish and many of the workers could speak enough French that there wasn't a great need to learn English, especially given the fact we were in Québec. At the time, I couldn't speak enough French myself to teach it, so all I could offer was English tutoring — which was welcomed by two workers, at least.

Though I didn't teach as much as I thought I would, I learned an incredible amount from the men I worked with. I learned about hard work and self-sacrifice, and got a glimpse of cultures I had never before experienced. I also had a lot of laughs and good times, learned how to drive a tractor, and can now swear with the best of them in both French and Spanish.

The deadline for applying to be a Labourer-Teacher with Frontier College of Nova Scotia is February 12, 1999, so if you are interested, contact Frontier College by email at:

labourteacher@frontiercollege.ca

Representatives of Frontier College will be coming to Dalhousie to talk about the organization before the deadline.