

## Immokalee

Sara Mangan

My time in Immokalee was eye-opening. I caught glimpses of both the way the law can be used to fight for justice for the most vulnerable members of our society and of its limitations in achieving that end in its present form. I met people of incredible character—migrant workers, lawyers, nurses, and others, and also witnessed racism and injustice on both individual and systemic levels.

The first day of the trip we set up a table, along with the medical students, at a Migrant Worker Fair at the Immokalee Health Department. Lots of different organizations were there, from the Sheriff's Department to the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The medical students provided free screenings for blood pressure, diabetes, and BMI. The law students listened as Professor Adelson answered the legal questions of the migrant workers present. The first person to ask for help was a Haitian man who had "Temporary Protective Status" (TPS), meaning that he'd been in the US during the earthquake in Haiti, and therefore he was allowed to stay in the US until things in his home country became more stable. The man said that he had not seen his wife or child in seven years. Seven years. I can't imagine that. And there was nothing that we could do for him. There was no legal way for his wife or child to enter the country. Not even for a visit on a tourist visa. So he was stuck. I have no doubt that here, working and earning money to send home to them, he is their lifeline. But it's so awful that it means he cannot be with them.

There was another man who was weeping and pointing to a scar on his abdomen. It turned out that his scar was from a stab wound. We initially thought he needed advice on disability, but what he really needed was an ambulance. He was in so much pain. The ambulance was called and when they got there I was relieved to see the paramedics, one of whom was a young blond woman who was all smiles and friendly to us. The two Spanish-speaking law students, Brandon and Yaima, went with the man to the ambulance to translate for him and the paramedics. Apparently the EMT's friendliness did not extend to the sick man. She made a snap judgment, based on his race, tattoos, or something equally ridiculous, saying, "If he's in so much pain, why is he at a carnival?" and walked back to the front of the ambulance without trying to engage him. Thankfully the other EMT seemed more compassionate. He spoke some Spanish, and climbed in the back with the sick man.

We discussed this afterwards and all hoped that the doctors and nurses did not take the same attitude towards this patient. These are the people who are supposed to help you when you're sick. It's terrible that they can be so dismissive and judgmental. It must have been frightening for this man to be alone and in pain in a place where he could not speak the language. The least the people charged with his care could do was be nice to him. We also worried that he would be not be able to get back to Immokalee. The nearest hospital is 45 minutes away in Fort Meyers. The man said that there was nobody to call to come get him. When we saw the man a few days later he looked a lot better. After being discharged from the hospital he had found a ride home. Everyone was happy and relieved.

Throughout the week we had seen this mixture of sadness and strength, courage and injustice, innovation and bureaucracy. The government seemed to be divided against itself. The Sheriff's Department was doing outreach at the Migrant Worker Fair, assuring people that they were not there to harm them, that their job was to catch criminals, not ordinary hardworking, undocumented farm workers. And I believe that they meant this, as much as they could. Yet they had an agreement with the federal government, essentially deputizing members of the police force to be unofficial ICE agents. And we were told that ICE itself sometimes set up road blocks, once even in front of the clinic that offers free or reduced rate care to members of the community who cannot afford medical care.

There were some wonderful women at the Health Department who went after landlords providing dangerous and substandard housing for migrant workers. Those women were committed to seeing that workers had housing options that were safe and dignified, and they struck me as a force to be reckoned with. Then there was the Farm Worker's Village, which had rows of nice affordable houses that were nearly all vacant because the government department that ran the Village was still using a model from the 60's and 70's that disqualified many of the people who most needed the housing from

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taking advantage of it. We also saw a Habitat for Humanity neighborhood filled with families and thriving.

There were farm owners who were good to their employees and a packing plant owner who allowed the workers to take a paid break for health screenings. There was also a local company that cheated employees out of earned sick days.

I really enjoyed meeting with local attorneys who work to help the migrant workers, the undocumented, and the victims of human trafficking. They are some extraordinary people, and I'd love to join them in their work after I

become a lawyer. I also learned about the limits of the law as it is. So often, there was nothing that could be done. Before this trip, advocacy had seemed less important to me than the "hands-on" work helping individuals. But seeing how directly policy affects these individuals have made me realize that systemic policy change is just as critical as work benefitting the individual. Things like the Dream Act and legislation that would create a pathway to citizenship for children brought here by their parents would make a world of difference. So would legislation making it easier for families to stay together.

Environmental concerns also seem to be a very important part of justice for farm workers. Along with poor housing conditions, farm workers are exposed to very dangerous

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