

# GO NORTH

Simon James Lopez, MS, Class of 2018

“I just want to go North.” That’s all he said, at first, in response to the preformed prompt I was told, nay instructed, to ask: “Please tell me what you think I should know about your situation.” Naturally, his response was anything but preformed. My silence would encourage him to speak more, but in those short words I already understood where his story was coming from. After all, this was Immokalee, no longer just a random sign on Alligator Alley (that’s Interstate 75 for the less initiated), but the beat-up textbook definition of a migrant town.

It’s interesting to think how we were once a nation that believed we were destined to expand throughout the continent. “Go West, young man,” was the rallying cry accredited to American author Horace Greeley in regards to Manifest Destiny: the notion that America’s mission was that of redemption and to make the West in the image of the agrarian way of life so that people had an opportunity to succeed. Fast forward a century—give or take a few decades—and you’ll find that the high hopes once held on the shoulders of our forefathers have been replaced by crusty, tomato-filled buckets held on the shoulders of a tired, abused, and underserved workforce.

The plight of the Immokalee migrant worker is a somber one. While numerous documentaries and protests have done their best to make the often unheard voices of Immokalee known, to have one of those voices speak directly to me was more impactful than anything I had experienced prior. He was already working full-time at the age of 15, despite suffering from chronic asthma. I saw not a young boy in front of me, but a young man; albeit with some moderate foot pain. A forklift spared crushing this young man’s foot, but still left it a 4/10 on the pain scale. However, it crushed his dreams to go northward towards more farms and work to support his mother and siblings. His lungs, sounding bilaterally clear from fancy pronounced medical words like budesonide and albuterol sulfate, created a unitary voice that



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worried how he would continue to provide for his family.

More often than not, my interactions in pediatrics during my Summer Clinical Practicum course in Immokalee were directed to patient’s parents and their responses. “My daughter has a R-A-S-H,” and, “My son needs his S-H-O-T-S,” were the common alphabet soups of the day that I feasted on most of the time. Yet finally I was able to meet a patient that held, and spoke, his own. I met a young man who was holding down a job so he could hold up his family and replace the plastic bins of tomatoes that normally rested on his shoulders with higher hopes that once manifested the American dream. This



## HANG ON LITTLE TOMATO

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was something I wouldn't have discovered had I not asked about his situation, but instead focused solely on his condition (like so many eager medical students checking a mental list tend to do). No tears were shed as we both sat as men trying their best to be men, each toiling away in our respective fields. With silent nods filling our stomachs more than any alphabet soup could have. I learned not of his problems, but of his story. I couldn't fix his flattened dreams any more than I could've fixed his flattened foot, but I could see his chest well-up with pride as I asked him of his life and how he faced the obstacles that came across his path. We parted ways with a handshake after the doctor came in to examine his foot, his nailbeds dirtied with the type of hard work glorified by Steinbeck. His wrath, and fears, subdued from conversation.

It would be remiss of me to say I didn't find the research I did on Greeley's quote to be a bit more meaningful after hearing my patient's story. When you attend a medical school that prides itself on responding to the needs of the elder, rural, minority, and underserved populations, coincidences tend to fall by the wayside. I'll allow Iowa Congressman Josiah Bushnell Grinnell

to elaborate on that quote, as he did in his own autobiography when discussing a conversation he had with Greeley:

"Go West, young man, go West. There is health in the country, and room away from our crowds of idlers and imbeciles." "That," I said, "is very frank advice, but it is medicine easier given than taken. It is a wide country, but I do not know just where to go."

I can only imagine my patient asking me where to go, where he could possibly find a way to provide a better life for his family. Where he could find work and health in a country that has seemingly forgotten him. I wish I could've given him the advice he deserved, frank as it could of been: "Go North, young man," I'd tell him, "Go North." ■

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