



Mario Lopez-Diaz

## Injured Guatemalan teen fought, changed labor policy

The boy came from Guatemala, crossed through Mexico, then Texas. He caught a ride to Florida and found work in the pepper fields. A man called Don Juan paid him in envelopes of cash. No pay stubs.

Then came the accident in Clewiston. He got bounced from a farm truck; the tires ran over his legs. He lost consciousness and was taken to a hospital.

"I kept waiting for somebody from the company to come help me."

Nobody did. At 15 or 16 — he never marked his birth year — Mario Lopez-Diaz was alone in America, injured and unable to send money home. When a friend introduced him to lawyers for the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project, he was startled to find out he had rights. The project filed suit against Pero Family Farms, the Delray Beach grower who



employed the contractor who employed the boy.

Instead of engaging in a court fight, president Peter Pero promised to overhaul the hiring and handling of laborers. Today, his state-of-the-art operation uses electronic timekeeping and sophisticated technology to count the buckets workers pick. Most significantly, Pero no longer allows contractors to handle payroll. And when workers get paid, the company name is on their checks.

Lopez-Diaz, still recovering, took a job in landscaping, and now, as he considers his place in Florida farming history, he feels proud: "I helped change something."

—Christine Evans

## Sex slavery, rape await defenseless

Among migrant women, many sexual assault victims never report it. Immigration might get called.

By JANE DAUGHERTY  
and CHRISTINE EVANS  
Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

LAKE WORTH — She was still a newlywed when the attack came.

Her supervisor cornered the Guatemalan teenager in a remote field in south Palm Beach County and demanded sex.

The police report is vivid: The man tied her hands behind her back. Stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth to stifle the screams. Forced her to the ground. Pinned her arms. Pulled his pants down. Began yanking at her belt.

He was still fumbling with the stubborn belt when three other women walked up. He pulled his pants up and fled.

Lying there, dirty, embarrassed, terrified, she shook and wept over a scene that would never leave her.

It is a story repeated day after day in the fields of Florida. But, if you can believe the migrants and their advocates, most victims never report it. They fear the police. Immigration might get called, and you know where that might lead.

The case of the Lake Worth woman was unusual because she and her husband mustered the courage to call the cops.

Sheriff's Detective Travis Cardinal tried to help, but the victim spoke an obscure Guatemalan language. He took her to Sister Rachel Sena, a Dominican nun working with Guatemalan migrants.

Sister Rachel remembers a frightened teenager who lived in a rented house in Lake Worth.

"We could see she was in shock. We could see she had been traumatized. The sheriff wanted so much to follow through on the case, but we could not find a true translator in Chuj. All of us were very, very sad about it. Soon after, the lady moved," she said.

"I remember somebody working with the Guatemalan Maya Center mentioned to me that this is so common. She said, 'Oh, Sister, if you only knew how common.'"

Still, the detective tried. He looked for the suspect, but he had disappeared after being fired. Then he discovered that the young woman had been fired, too.

"What I found so disturbing was that she was terminated for being a victim. I was just dumbfounded. What benefit do they have to report a crime?"

But it could have been worse. She could have been kidnapped and turned into a sex slave.

For women attempting to flee the poverty of their homelands, rape and forced prostitution loom large on the list of threats they face in their quest to find work in the United States.

The danger has become so widespread that the U.S. Department of Justice issued a report in August calling trafficking in sexual slaves, including children, forced prostitution and slave labor "a heinous international crime and human rights abuse." The report estimated that 18,000 to 20,000 people a year "are trafficked annually into the U.S." to be enslaved in "commercial sexual exploitation such as prostitution and pornography or labor exploitation."

In South Florida, human rights attorney Maria Jose Fletcher has represented dozens of immigrant victims of sexual slavery and rape through the nonprofit Florida Immigration and Advocacy Center in Miami.

"We've been working on trafficking cases since 1997," said Fletcher. "Many of these cases are heartbreaking because they are so brutal, so inhuman . . . I have seen girls as young as 14 who were repeatedly raped by the men smuggling them into the U.S. to force them into prostitution."

Prosecuting traffickers in sexual slavery can be difficult, even under the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which provided tougher penalties under federal law, Fletcher said.

"It's very difficult for them to stand up for themselves," Fletcher said of the female victims, often rural teenagers with little formal education. "They are afraid because they are in the country illegally. They are afraid because the rapes often destroy the last vestiges of their self-esteem."

This was the case with the young woman that social worker Maria Vega met in Immokalee.

Vega, who works for Catholic Charities, said the girl was "still a teenager when she was brought across into Texas by a coyote. She said he kidnapped her, had sex with her every day for two or three weeks, then beat her up and threw her out."

"She ended up in a hospital and was so badly beaten the doctors were forced to remove her womb. They asked her if she wanted to be sent back to her hometown in Mexico. She said, 'No. I can't lie to some man and tell him I can have children. There's no sense going home. I'm not good for anything back there anymore.'"



Silvia Vazquez comforts her father-in-law, Cruz Vazquez, at St. Mary's Medical Center. He was badly hurt in a van accident.

PAUL J. MILETTE/Staff Photographer

The Vazquez family

## Accident demolishes family's promising start

The Vazquez family was new to this country and still struggling to pay off a hefty coyote's debt when they found a beat-up trailer to rent in Indian River County. The young women in the family, Silvia and her sister-in-law, Evelia, took jobs in a citrus packing house.

The men, Cruz Vazquez, 49, and his son, Guillermo, found construction work. This spring, they hopped in a labor van to ride to a site. It was full of other men, as labor vans often are.

The van had a blow-out on Interstate 95 near Fort Pierce, Silvia said. "The passengers were ejected, and everybody was taken to different hospitals. They flew

(Cruz) by helicopter to St. Mary's (in West Palm Beach). The head injury was bad. He was in a coma. He hurt his leg and arm."

Vazquez eventually recovered enough to return to Toluca, Mexico, where he has a wife and children. He had lost much of his memory.

"I really imagined life here would be something different," said Silvia, who returned home, too. She has children there, and, in the end, she could not stand the thought that they had little to eat, while she, here, had so much.

—Christine Evans

Cesar Pascual

## Lightning preys on men in fields

Cesar Pascual kept his eye on the sky as he cut string to tie tomato plants in an Immokalee field this April.

A thunderstorm was approaching, but the contractor wouldn't let him or the other 12 workers leave.

"We were sharpening the machetes and we could see the storm getting closer," Pascual said. "It was clearly bringing lightning."

The storm moved overhead, but Ramiro Rodriguez still refused to order the workers back on the bus. Then lightning struck.

"We saw a lot of light," Pascual said. "The light exploded. When we became aware again, we were on the ground. It burned me all down my left leg. Another guy, it broke his eardrum."

But the worst hit was Gilberto Dominguez Acosta, 42, who was killed.

"I was about 2 meters from the guy who died," recalled Pascual. "His hat, his shirt and his pants were all ripped open. Even his boots. His boots were split open in three places. Others tried to help him, but his body was already loose, his eyes closed and he was dead."

—John Lantigua



The baby son of Apolonia Jimenez, 22, died beside her in bed in this trailer in Immokalee. The death was ruled sudden infant death syndrome.

LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer

Apolonia Jimenez

## Sudden death in an unheated trailer

It was very cold in Immokalee the night little Pablo died.

The baby's 22-year-old mother, Apolonia Jimenez, didn't have money or space for a crib. So Pablo slept with her in the tiny room of an unheated trailer that she shared with six other people.

Early in the evening of Jan. 15, Pablo cried a lot. "I think it was colic," Jimenez said. "Later he felt better, and he went to bed with me."

The temperature dropped. According to the Florida Weather Service, it fell to 38 degrees.

"I covered him with a blanket and then with more blankets," Jimenez

said.

"I woke up at 2 a.m. He was quiet," she said. "At 4 a.m., I woke up again. I covered him some more. He didn't wake up the way he usually did during the night."

"Finally about 6 a.m. I tried to wake him up. I said, 'Pablito, get up.' I took the covers off him and picked him up. He was pale and stiff and very cold. I realized . . . I prayed to God. I said, 'I'll do anything if he lives, God.' But it was too late." Pablo was pronounced dead in the morning.

The death was ruled sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

—John Lantigua