

Language classes sow seeds of hope

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

They toil long hours in the fields, their wiry, bronze bodies bent over crops, sweat falling like rain in the midsummer heat.

Up before dawn, they are ferried away to the farms that dot the bucolic countryside of Western Massachusetts, giving one last kiss to the babies they have brought with them, the reasons they have traveled so far to get ahead.

For many, the work does not end at sunset. That is when the real harvest begins.

On a recent night, in a small air-conditioned room that must seem like a refrigerator to some, migrant farm workers are learning the language of this country. With each word she shows them on a chart, instructor Laura Qualliotine is planting a seed.

One student named Santa points to the word “hot” and murmurs “calliente.” Then she repeats the Spanish word in English. “H-O-T.”

Another student named Olga circles the English word “T-I-R-E-D” on a page when Qualliotine yawns to press her point.

The summer English language learning program is a collaboration between the Gray House, a social service program headquartered in Springfield’s North End, and Head Start. Janis Santos, executive director of Head Start, said her agency applied for the federally funded migrant worker grant about five years ago when it learned that the largest number of migrant workers in the state are picking crops around Western Massachusetts.

Some 73 children receive child care services while parents can take English language lessons at Head Start offices on Wilbraham Road and Carew Street. Lori A. Chaves, director of clinical and family services for Head Start, said Head Start buses start picking up children at 4:45 a.m. to bring them to Head Start for the day while their parents make their way to the fields. For every child that enters a Head Start program, there is at least one on a waiting list to get in thanks to funding that has remained stagnant for years.

About 15 parents are taking the English language classes, says Qualliotine. Director of adult education services at the Gray House, she is also a bilingual instructor who slips effortlessly into Spanish when needed during this class at the Wilbraham Road Head Start.

In a country where the debate still rages over whether English should be the only official language, it is clear that the students in this class are eager to learn it. Some have crossed deserts and battled raging rivers to be here.

Many migrant farm workers are here legally on agricultural work visas but their stay is limited to growing seasons.

Still, those who have worked here hard enough and long enough know that they may get an opportunity to legally stay here. The imprints of their homelands are etched on their faces and in their hearts, but, like the Joad family in John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath,” they are driven by the itinerant quest for work, for food, and for a future.

Carlos Morales, family service coordinator for Head Start, says there is something special about this particular class of students, whose hands have dug deep into our soil to put food on our table and who are hungry for a better life.

“They really seem to appreciate it,” he says.

Holyoke/Chicopee/Springfield Head Start Inc. connects the families in the program and others with a variety of services, including a healthy relationship program and those offering information on nutrition and health care.

But Santos knows that for every family helped, many more are in need. The daughter of Scottish immigrants who married a Portuguese man in Ludlow, she has often brought the plight of poor families from all backgrounds to Washington. The agency serves over 1,300 children and families, including 700 in Springfield alone.

Head Start began in 1965 under the Johnson administration and has grown with evidence that children fare better in life when they receive critical education and services before entering school. One of its biggest champions is U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Santos says.

Nationwide, between 1 and 3 million farm workers, most of them Latino, leave their homelands to pick crops in the United States. Although the income for the majority puts them below the U.S. poverty level, it is often more than they can hope for in the impoverished countries they come from.

For a migrant farm worker from Mexico, Guatemala or Jamaica, Springfield must seem like a different universe. Yet, Chaves says the migrant children are remarkably resilient. Home, for them, is where their parents are.

On this hot summer night, in the heart of Springfield’s Mason Square, their parents are entering a new world, one where hope springs eternal long after the last field has been tilled.

“Allegre,” the students murmur, connecting the language in their head with the word on the paper.

“Happy,” says one student named Noemi as a shy smile sweeps across her face. “Happy.”

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