

Niagara Advance

Farm labourers by day, women teaching English, Spanish to aid migrant workers

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Local News - For 12 years, young university graduates have been staying at the Konik farm on Concession 6, living and working alongside migrant workers in an effort to teach them English.

Sent to farms across Ontario, Quebec and B.C. by Frontier College, young adults take their enthusiasm for teaching and willingness to work hard with them.

Frontier College is a Canada-wide, volunteer-based literacy organization, teaching people to read and write and offering outreach programs such as the laborer-teacher program, which began in 1899 to make education accessible to people in work camps across Canada.

It continues today, aimed at the farm workers in rural communities, but is now just one of the many programs offered by Frontier.

This farming season, in addition to picking and packing fruit while teaching English words and phrases to their fellow farm workers, Tiffany Nicholson-Smith, from Lakefield, Ont., and Bronwyn Underhill, from Toronto, want to take their teaching one step further.

Both 22, both university graduates in international development, and both Spanish-speaking, they would love to teach some Spanish to the locals who come into contact with Mexican farm workers.

They have learned from talking to the Mexicans that their goals are to speak enough English to communicate with bank and store employees, doctors and nurses and others they come into contact with during their stay in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

That communication would be improved, the two women decided, if the locals who deal with the farm workers were willing to learn some Spanish as well.

After the women are finished their day's work on the farm, they get cleaned up and travel to other farms in the area that employ migrant workers, teaching whatever level of English the farm employees are looking for—from basic words and simple phrases for those here in Canada for the first time, to correct spelling for those who have been here several years and already have some knowledge of the language.

They also enjoy some of the give and take of learning—the farm laborers help them learn better farming techniques, as well as improving their Spanish.

While working on the farm daily and teaching at night might seem like an exhausting schedule, the enthusiasm for what they are accomplishing keeps them going.

"The Mexicans are so appreciative to have us here to work with them, and we appreciate that they allow us to teach them," says Nicholson-Smith.

"Some of them have been coming for a while and have some experience with the program from past years, and although there are different teachers each year, we all have the same objectives."

The women will be at the NOTL Public Library, Tuesday, July 12 from 6 to 7 p.m., hoping to teach some Spanish to locals who want to learn. They plan to hold regular Tuesday evening lessons if the interest is there.

No registration is necessary.



Bronwyn Underhill and Tiffany Nicholson-Smith are spending their summer in NOTL, working on a local farm by day and in the evening teaching English to migrant farm workers.

Photo: Staff