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Farmworkers earn a place of their own

Farm owners help their workers buy homes in town

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THE DALLES, Ore. — Farmworker Manuel Flores can look out the front door of his house in The Dalles and know he will have a home when he retires. Four years ago, that wasn't the case.

Until 2002, Flores, 49, had spent most of his adult life living on-farm at Orchard View Farms in The Dalles. He wondered as the years went by where he would live when he stopped planting cherry trees, pruning them and picking their fruit each summer.

"I was getting old and I didn't have a place of my own," he said.

Flores is a participant in a program begun a decade ago by Orchard View Farms that pays workers a bonus of between \$3,000 and \$5,000 to provide the down payment for a house.

Manuel Flores, working on a newly planted cherry tree at Orchard View Farms in The Dalles, Ore., is a participant in the farm's program that helps workers buy houses in town.

Ken Bailey, a co-owner of the farm, said the program more than pays for itself in worker loyalty and because it frees up farmworker housing for the farm's seasonal work force — a work force that climbs to more than 700 at peak season.

"It's been good for them and it's been good for us," Bailey said. As evidence, Bailey said he has adequate labor supply this harvest season at a time when many cherry growers are having difficulty meeting labor needs.

"How you treat your employees is very important to make sure they want to work for you," he said.

Flores spent most of his early years in the United States living in one of Orchard View Farms' three labor camps and one of approximately 350 labor camps in Oregon.

According to Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration statistics, approximately 12,000 Oregon farmworkers live in labor camps.

Flores, who eventually moved into a rental house on Orchard View Farms, is one of about a dozen Orchard View Farms workers to take advantage of the down-payment program.

After spending more than 25 years on the Bailey farm, Flores was apprehensive at first about moving into town. "I wasn't sure how I was going to live in town around so many people," he said. "I thought it was going to be hard, but it is not."

Flores and his wife and two sons are now well assimilated into their neighborhood. His wife works at a cannery in town, and his two teenagers go to school.

Manuel's brother, Jose Flores, who manages the three labor camps on Orchard View Farms, also is a participant in the program. His mortgage payment is nearly three times more than the rental payment to stay at one of the farm's labor camps, but, he said, it is worth the extra expense.

"In town," he said, "it is mine."

Families living near the Latino farmworkers initially viewed the program with skepticism, Bailey said. But now, neighbors embrace the Latino families as part of the neighborhood and, in fact, are having a hard time keeping their lawns as nice as the Flores', Bailey said.

Manuel Flores, who left Mexico in 1971 after a fish die-off closed him out of the fishing industry, said he likes the quality of life in the United States and hopes to live here — in his home in The Dalles — long after his working days are over.

"It's a different feeling," he said of owning his own house. "I like it."

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