

LOS ANGELES

Pictures of farmworkers go to Museum of Tolerance

Photos come from 9-month trek into fields of state's \$32 billion agriculture industry

Dana Bartholomew, Los Angeles Daily News

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After a stern lesson on civil disobedience at Wilbur Avenue Elementary, Rick Nahmias staged a sit-down strike to protest confiscated car-racing stickers.

Three decades later, the award-winning Valley Glen photographer and writer still bucks authority by standing up for California farmworkers and other dispossessed groups.

"From that, the question of authority became a no-brainer for me," he said. "Coming from the Valley, we lived in an amazingly sheltered bubble - and all I wanted to do was pop it."

Pop it he has, with 40 powerful photographs and captions depicting the plight of immigrant farmworkers and their families.

His work, "The Migrant Project: Contemporary California Farm Workers," is now on display at the Museum of Tolerance after a tour of 20 U.S. cities.

This year, his collection has been compiled into a book of the same name and turned into a standards-based curriculum for California schools. Up to half the proceeds go to helping farmworkers throughout the state.

For the museum, "The Migrant Project" was the perfect exhibit to commemorate Cesar Chavez Day. And to inspire social change through personal stories.

"Rick Nahmias' dramatic, yet sensitive photographs of the faces and stories of those who work in the agricultural fields of California offer each of us an insight into the lives and struggles of the 1.1 million farmworkers who help provide 50 percent of the food in the United States," said Elana Samuels, assistant director of museum affairs.

The stories stacked up during a nine-month odyssey into the fields of the state's \$32 billion agriculture industry with a battered Nikon FE.

And then Nahmias crisply framed them in black and white.

A cherubic Victor Hernandez, age 6, peers out from a halo of grapevines near a town north of Death Valley.

A farmworker sits inside a shack made of shower curtains and cardboard in Carlsbad, his only luxury a tape player charged by a car battery.

More than a dozen pairs of strawberry pickers' boots sit piled outside a single motel room in Santa Maria.

A tomato picker in Stockton holds out seven tokens worth 95 cents each - or \$6.65 - the results of a half-day's haul of 14 buckets weighing about 350 pounds.

An old man in Calexico holds a paycheck of \$74.08, his net for two days' work. Too tired to return home to Mexicali, he sleeps in a nearby box car.

"It looks hard, intense," said 16-year-old LaRamie Hardy during a recent visit to the exhibit. "I wouldn't want to be a farmworker. It looks kind of sad, because people have to do that for people they don't even know."

Nahmias, 42, a graduate of Taft High School who'd pursued a career in filmmaking and script-writing before a researching stint for political pundit Arianna Huffington, took a sharp left turn to document America's breadbasket.

"Growing up in the San Fernando Valley, what we knew of farms were Pierce College hay bales and cow tipping after hours," said Nahmias, who grew up in Tarzana. "The only Mexicans we knew were housekeepers. My only connection to food was a trip to Gelson's."

But it was after Nahmias had enrolled in a cooking school in Napa Valley in 2002 that he began to wonder where that fennel bulb came from.

While the future chefs diced and sliced as they sipped wine, he vowed instead to follow vegetables to their source.

In doing so, he discovered the mostly Latino farmworkers who awoke well before dawn to toil long hours in scorching fields.

"I came into this with a sense of pity for these people," he said, surveying the faces of his photos, "and it was very quickly transformed into respect.

"I didn't see anybody sitting around saying, 'Woe is me.' I saw people getting up at 3 in the morning to stand in line to go to work, to stand in line for minimum wage - and at times, less - to work in 100-degree heat."

Nahmias, who has degrees in filmmaking and religious studies from New York University, also has documented marginalized communities at prayer, including Zen Buddhists at San Quentin, recovering Jewish drug addicts and Muslim survivors of genocide.

His next multimedia exhibit will tell the story of the last years of a Catskill Mountains colony of Holocaust survivors.

Then he will return to the fields for a grant-funded study on farm-labor practices that work.

"I'm a foodie. I'm a lefty. I'm a professional photographer. That's enough," said the intense shutterbug who still insists on using film, wearing a T-shirt with the logo "If you aren't completely appalled, then you aren't paying attention." On his feet, he says, are roper boots worn by a now-dead Tucson sheriff.

He stops by a photo he snapped of the grave of an unclaimed migrant worker in a field along the Mexican border. Its inscription says "No Olvidado," or not forgotten.

"If you aren't willing to suck the marrow out of life, then what is the reason for being here?" he said. "I hope to plant a few seeds of compassion, so that people will understand where their food comes from."