

## FIRST PLACE

Essay Contest Winner, Ages 14-18

**Zulema Lopez, 17**

Laredo, TX

It's a summer day, the sun is rising, and the sound of my mother's cooking awakes me. Her meal will be enough to get us through the day that awaits us. One would think this was about a child that awakes to her mother's cooking to go to school like any other ordinary child, but that isn't the case here. My life is much more complex, even to this day. I live day by day struggling to get past each month with my family. Working in the fields is all we know, it's all we think we're good at, it's what we do to survive.

My family has been working in the fields for many generations; I as a fourth generation farm worker still continue this cycle. We travel from Texas, Michigan, Florida, North Carolina, and even Tennessee. A typical summer for our family is going to Michigan and starting to work right away. While most families are on summer vacations, we are working. We have no days off. "Our ordinary lifestyle" is what we call it. We must work the fields, because we know that's the only source of income our family will get and we know the struggle it takes to support ourselves.

Our summer starts off with asparagus season for about four weeks. We work about ten to twelve hours every day. Then followed by the strawberry season, which is about 5 to 6 weeks, depending on how it grew. As soon as the strawberry season ends, it gets tougher. Cucumber season begins, which involves working fifteen to sixteen hours a day. We work from sunrise to sundown. At this point, we work in the hottest time of the summer. As much as I would like for our farm work to end there, it doesn't. Harvesting apples in my opinion is not the easiest, but it's the nicest. I always say this is my favorite crop to pick, only because it's in the winter. Due to the time change, it gets darker and we get to go home earlier. This is just a glimpse into my family's summer and early winter.

Falling behind in my studies is the main problem that I face every time I move from state to state to work in the fields. For example, during my freshmen year I attended four high schools. I was devastated when my counselor advised me that I was lacking credits and that I was going to be a 2<sup>nd</sup> year freshmen. Luckily my counselor arranged for me to attend summer school. I dedicated my summer to my studies and managed to gain two credits and catch up in school; though not going to work in the summer set me back financially. I usually struggle when I change schools, because all of my classes are all very advanced by the time I arrive in the middle of the school year. I get very stressed out about my grades dropping while continuing to work on the side. Not many individuals understand my lifestyle, but I must do what is needed in order to provide for my family.

When asked about my dreams four years ago, I said I didn't have any dreams. Today I'm proud to say that I do have dreams. My migrant counselor has helped me greatly to get ahead in school with the help of the migrant program at United Independent School District. As migrant students, we get support from everyone in the district and it drives me to succeed in life. My dream is to break my family's cycle of poverty and working in the fields. I want to go to a university and be a role model to my brother and sisters; to show my siblings that if I'm able to succeed and achieve my dreams, they can as well.