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What Drives Migration? Surprise, It's Corn

Port Washington, N.Y. -- This January, a delegation of 15 Long Islanders traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico, to explore the roots of migration from Mexico to the United States, meeting with Mexican migration experts, interviewing migrants, and visiting communities affected by migration.

During the trip, the delegation -- which included educators, university students, and government appointees from both Nassau and Suffolk counties -- made a surprising discovery: They learned that Mexican migration patterns are inextricably linked to the global price of corn.

As a result of free trade deals between the U.S. and Mexico, the quantity of cheap imported corn in Mexico has exploded in recent years, undercutting the locally grown product and driving small farmers out of business, a heady blow in a country where 10 million people -- a quarter of the workforce-- live off the land. Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was enacted in 1994, roughly 2 million people have been displaced from the Mexican agricultural sector while the rural poverty rate has climbed to 85 percent, the delegation learned.

At the same time, nearly 600,000 Mexican farmers have been forced to migrate to the U.S., where they've formed communities like the one in Riverhead on the East End of Long Island, which includes 200-300 members of the indigenous Mixteca tribe.

"It's been truly eye-opening to learn about the economic conditions that are forcing so many families to come here," says Christine Finn, the assistant superintendent for curriculum in the Patchogue-Medford school district and a delegate on the trip. "Understanding the root causes of migration should encourage us all to be more sensitive in our treatment of other people, including children in our schools and their families who make up our communities."

One particularly memorable part of the delegation, which lasted from January 9 - 16, was a visit to San Juan Sosola, a tiny Mexican farming village nestled in the mountains near Oaxaca. The village -- beautiful and welcoming despite endemic poverty -- became a living lesson about the impact of imbalanced global trade.

In San Juan Sosola, the indigenous Mixteca residents cultivate corn, following a tradition that has endured for thousands of years. All meals include some variety of the grain, whether it surfaces in tortillas or *pozole*, a hominy stew with a recipe that predates the arrival of the Spanish in that area.

But despite the long history of corn cultivation in this area, San Juan Sosola, like many other Mexican farming towns, has a bleak future.

Since the implementation of NAFTA, local farmers and their families have been forced to migrate, and according to residents of San Juan Sosola, the village's population has been cut by half, with only 100 or so people remaining. Of those left, very few are between 25 - 40 years old. Only three children attend the village pre-school, and five attend the elementary school.

Deborah Little, a sociology professor at Adelphi University, took meals with a local family in San Juan Sosola and heard some of their tribulations firsthand.

"I see the grief in Doña Graciela's face as she tells me of the brother and sister she will probably never see again," Little says. "There is no work in her community, one that formerly survived through agriculture. Her siblings went to the U.S. for work. The week after we met Graciela, her youngest son left also, seeking work in another place. Here in the U.S., we must work to end these devastating trade policies so that Mexican communities will thrive rather than die."

The extreme population downshift has even affected recreation in the village:

"In my conversations with a couple of young men in San Juan Sosola, I learned that soccer is no longer the favorite pastime because there are not enough young people to make two teams," says Sergio Argueta, a member of the delegation who directs [S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth](#), a gang prevention and intervention agency based in Hempstead. "There just aren't enough bodies to play anymore."

As important as the experience itself is the coalition of Long Island professionals that were brought together. After learning about the relationship between NAFTA and forced migration, members of the delegation are mobilizing to share their stories with community leaders and organizations across Long Island throughout 2010.

The trip was funded by the Port Washington-based [Hagedorn Foundation](#) through a grant to [Witness for Peace](#), an organization that sponsors educational delegations to Latin America. During the trip, Long Island Wins online editor Ted Hesson [blogged about his experiences](#) and [posted photos](#) online. Photos and video of the trip will be made available to journalists upon request.

List of delegation members:

Live or work in Suffolk County:

Bill Zimmerman- is a journalism professor at SUNY Stony Brook University. He was one of CNN's first news anchors and a founder of Long Island's News 12.

Darlene Troge- is the director of Workplace Policy and Compliance for the Town of Southampton.

Christine Finn- is the assistant superintendent of curriculum for the Patchogue-Medford school district.

Gary Mar- is a philosophy professor at SUNY Stony Brook University and started the Asian-American studies program there. He also sits on the Suffolk County Human Rights Commission.

América Marcos- studies psychology and sociology at SUNY Stony Brook. She's in her junior year.

Sandra Dunn- is the immigration program officer at the Hagedorn Foundation, which provided the grant to fund the delegation.

Deborah Little- is a sociology professor at Adelphi University.

Live or work in Nassau:

Sergeant Mike O'Mara- is a Nassau County police officer in a First Precinct anti-crime unit.

Carrié Solages- is a defense lawyer with offices in Hapauge and Mineola.

Wilhelmina Funderburke- is retired, but works as a volunteer with the Roosevelt Community Revitalization Group and Sustainable Long Island.

Sergio Argueta- is the founder and head of S.T.R.O.N.G., Struggling To Reunite Our New Generation, a gang prevention and intervention agency based in Hempstead.

Carol Gordon- is an activist who is a board member for the Long Island Progressive Coalition and Yes We Can! Long Island.

Ted Hesson- is the online editor of Long Island Wins, a communications campaign focused on immigration.

Daphney Pierre- is a senior at Adelphi University, where she studies psychology.

Rahsmía Zatar- has worked with S.T.R.O.N.G. and is now the census project director for the Uniondale Community Council.