

# The Migrant Project

PHOTOS BY RICK NAHMIAS



A new book takes readers inside the lives of the thousands whose backbreaking efforts put food on tables every day.

**EVEN** as Americans are nourished by the fruits and vegetables they consume daily, the lives of the migrant workers that deliver this bounty to us remain mostly invisible. Too often, in the vacuum of this ignorance, rather than gratitude for the sufferings of these essential but marginalized laborers, the nation offers them a harvest of fear and hostility. The

recent crafting of anti-immigrant legislation is but one example of this tendency. It would seem that without an adequate understanding of who these laborers are, we have failed as a nation to rightly measure their worth.

Photojournalist, documentary filmmaker and writer Rick Nahmias attempts to remedy this condition. Through his photo book

and national art exhibition of the same name, *The Migrant Project: Contemporary California Farm Workers*, (University of New Mexico Press) Nahmias examines laborer's lives in that important agricultural state. It is through the sweat of California's more than 1 million farm workers, half of whom are undocumented, that half of the nation's produce is brought to market.

To bring us this rare glimpse into the faces, lives and hearts of migrant workers, Nahmias traveled 4,000 miles throughout California, visiting nearly 50 rural communities before arriving at the selected 40 images that grace his book and exhibition. The eloquence of Nahmias's black and white photographs are further enhanced by accompanying texts. Together, they begin to paint a picture of this sector of the American experience whose story has been relegated to the shadows.

While we may have become familiar with the image of the migrant worker toil-

ing in the fields, Nahmias's lens seeks to tell a new story. While the relation between workers and what they are picking remains a focus, Nahmias extends his view beyond that subject, and indeed moves inward. We see children bathing, an elderly man demonstrating. We enter sleeping quarters, peak into a migrant bus, and seem to join work crews as they load flatbeds. We find ourselves drawn into the world of these photographs, even as we are humbled by the challenges their subjects face.

Often Nahmias's images infuse apparently exterior farm scenes with the

almost mythic quality of charged interiors. Outside becomes inside. We begin to see the subtle, even intimate connections between the laborer and the land. These are not merely people undertaking back-breaking work: they are fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, friends and activists, and they are people dreaming and yearning. Finally, within the frame of Nahmias's photos we begin to sense the enormous physical and emotional cost of what we may have come to take for granted.

The book and art exhibit feature several essays that deepen our encounter with

the lives of the men and women crucial to bringing food to our tables. Dolores Huerta, the now legendary co-founder of the United Farm Workers union provides the foreword. In the preface, Nahmias—who was working as a researcher and writer for political columnist Arianna Huffington before embarking on this artistic project—tells how and why he took on this photographic subject. The conclusion features writings by key farm worker activists as well as a pair of striking oral histories of migrant workers.

What emerges is a portrait of hard-working people who make an enormous contribution to the quality of life in the U.S., even as their dreams are so often thwarted.

Those who purchase this stunning and informative book can take heart in the fact that half the earnings generated from its sales will go to non-profit and charitable farm worker organizations. **H**

*Since opening in 2003, The Migrant Project exhibition has toured throughout the U.S., stopping at museums, universities and cultural centers. Through the summer the exhibition will be shown at the Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan and in the fall can be seen at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama.*