



By Lorne McClinton

## Parallel worlds

*Guest workers give their families a better life by working abroad*

**D**onald Lloyd (Rocky) Dyer hates being cold. But even the 5°F wind chill outside the departure lounge at Toronto, Ontario's Pearson Airport can't keep the smile from his face this bleak November morning. For the past seven months the 58-year old farm worker from Rock River, Jamaica has been working on Ken Forth's broccoli farm outside of Hamilton, Ontario, and today he is going home.

Dyer has been living dual lives for the past thirty years. From November to April he's Donald Lloyd Dyer, a subsistence farmer

► **Left:** Donald Lloyd (Rocky) Dyer loves coming to Canada as a guest worker. It lets him make big money in a hurry.

► **Below:** Working away from home for over half of each year has opened doors for Dyer and his family including funding his children's post secondary educations.





►**Top:** Jamaican workers have to learn to dress in layers to ward off the cold temperatures in the Spring and Fall. ►**Above:** Rocky has worked for Ken Forth for 30 years. He attended Forth's second wedding.

living on the rugged farm that his grandmother left him, in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica. He's been married to his wife Carmen for 25 years. They have four children, Tajana, Ryan, Trishauna and Tanease. He also has two older children from a previous relationship.

**Guest worker.** For the rest of the year he's known by his nickname, Rocky, while he works legally in Canada as a farm laborer under the Seasonal Agriculture Worker Program (SAWP). The program, the oldest of that country's multiple temporary foreign worker programs, is vaguely similar to the H-2A guest worker visa program that U.S. farmers use.

Rocky lives on Forth's farm in dormitory-style living quarters with 16 other Jamaican men. For guest workers, just like Atlantic Canadians working in the oilsands in Northern Alberta, life away from home revolves around work. Planting — picking — processing — packaging; whatever needs to be done. The hours are long; the longer the better.



"It's okay because that's what you came here for," Rocky says. "You didn't come here to sport, you came to work."

Whole sectors of the agriculture industry in both Canada and the U.S. depend on foreign workers with Rocky's type of attitude for their labor needs. Most horticulture operations would be forced out of business without them.

**K**en Forth, Rocky's employer, is the president of F.A.R.M.S., a farmer-run organization that co-ordinates the SAWP. His experience finding local workers is fairly typical. While his operation is located inside the corporate limits of Hamilton, a major industrial city that's suffered from high unemployment since 2008, he finds it virtually impossible to find locals willing to head out to the countryside for a manual farm labor job.

International Harvest, A Case Study of How Foreign Workers Help American Farms Grow Crops - and the Economy, a 2013 report analyzing farm labor in North Carolina, by the



►**Above:** Work days can be very long, sometimes the start before dawn. ►**Right:** Rocky cooks his own meals in his residence's commercial kitchen. He lives in dormitory-style accommodations with sixteen other Jamaican men. Accommodations have to meet all the SAWP standards.

Partnership for a New American Economy and the Center for Global Development in Washington, DC, reached the same conclusion. In fact, study author, Michael Clemens, wrote that there is virtually no supply of native manual farm laborers in North Carolina and that they do not take jobs on farms no matter how bad the economy becomes.

Despite how important temporary foreign workers and immigrants are to the agriculture sector their presence is a hot political issue on both sides of the Canada and U.S. border. All the noise makes it easy to forget that they are real people with real goals. Most, like Rocky, come here to work hard to improve the lives of their families back home.





►**Above:** Abe Demontagnac, one of the other old timers, has worked at Forth's, with Rocky, for 18 years. Both men are decades older than the average guest worker. ►**Left:** Dyer and his Grandson Ryan spend time together to reconnect in the winters when Dyer's back from Canada.

"A typical temporary worker is male and comes from a very poor area where there aren't a lot of options for making money," says Maria Eugenia de Luna Villalón, a language professor at Wilfred Laurier University, in Waterloo, Ontario, who's taken a special interest in migrant labor issues. "They have a bit of that adventurer spirit and have a really strong desire to make a better life for their family."

Rocky, at 58, is twice the age of the average guest worker. Two other old timers work with him, he says, but he's the oldest on the crew.

"Working in Canada lets me make big mon-



ey in a hurry," Dyer says. "I built my house (in Rock River) out of there, sent my children to school out of there. It (SAWP) lets me put food on the table so nobody goes hungry."

Even though Ontario guest workers, like Rocky, are generally just paid the provincial minimum wage, that's big money for someone from Jamaica, Mexico, or one of the other countries that send workers to Canada through SAWP. Six months of manual farm labor in Canada lets Dyer make as much money as he could earn in five years in Jamaica.

"Donald Lloyd's work through the program (SAWP) has given our family opportunities that we wouldn't have had if he stayed in Jamaica," Carmen Dyer says. "He has no skills per se and jobs here are hard to get."

Remittances, the money workers send back to their families, are vitally important to the

economy in their home country too. According to Bank of Jamaica statistics, remittances are the country's largest source of foreign currency. They are second only to oil in Mexico.

**Less poverty.** "These worker's earnings have an impact on the local Jamaican economy allowing for investment in small business and farm operations," says Janice Miller, the Jamaican High Commissioner to Canada in a prepared statement. "This has led to a multiplier effect which has assisted in reducing unemployment and in alleviating poverty levels. Higher employment levels have also resulted in more social stability in the country."

While guest worker program earnings open doors for workers and their families they come with a high personal cost. They can become detached from life at home and often remain strangers in a strange land up north.

►**Top:** Rocky does what ever jobs need to be done at Forth's operation.

►**Above:** Dyer and his wife Carmen talk nearly every night on their cellphones when Rocky is in Canada. Before cellphones they kept in touch by writing letters.



►Above: Tajana and her children Ryan and Trishauna miss Donald Lloyd when he's away.

"Adjusting to life up north is difficult at best, especially when there are language barriers," says Gregorio Billikopf a Labor Management Farm Advisor Emeritus with the University of California. "Temporary legal workers, and illegal ones also, leave family and loved ones behind. Those left behind suffer enormously from not having the presence of a husband and father in the home."

**Not easy.** "It's not easy for mommy to take care of the children alone," Dyer's wife Carmen says. "You have to do all the things around the house that he would do if he was here. Seven months seems long and you look forward to the time he'll be back."

"It's hard enough to raise children in the 21st century; it is even harder without both parents," says Alec Lemoreaux with the Northwest Seasonal Workers Association in



►Above: While Donald Lloyd is in Canada all the jobs he would normally be doing at home fall on Carme's shoulder. She says it's sometimes hard but it's worth it in the end.

Medford, Oregon. "There is no question that some families split up in the process, but most don't. Knowing they're fighting for a better future helps them get through the tough times."

Dyer's oldest daughter Tajana says it was bittersweet growing up in a home with her father gone so much of the time. She understands he is up North making a sacrifice for his family to have a better life but that doesn't mean they still don't miss him terribly.

"He was absent so much," Tajana says. "He wasn't here for my graduation; he wasn't here for my wedding and he wasn't here when my children were born. Yet, because he was making this sacrifice I became the first person in our family to graduate from college. I'm now a secondary school teacher in Manchester."

It's 80°F when Dyer's plane lands in Kingston, Jamaica. Tajana and her husband are there to meet him. His first order of business is to eat a fresh banana and then grab a meal somewhere. Anything but rice is good; he's tired of rice after seven months of eating his own rice cooking. They can't stop too long, they still have a two hour drive across rugged, winding, mountain roads before he's home.

"The first thing I'll do when I get home is hug the wife and give her a kiss, Dyer says. "Then we'll sit down and talk."

For the next five months they'll be an intact family again. Then it's back to Canada. After all, he says, he still has two daughters in college and that costs money. Forth says Rocky has a job on his farm as long as he wants one.

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