

## SYNOPSIS

*After I Pick the Fruit* is a feature-length documentary that follows the lives of five immigrant farmworker women - three of them undocumented - over a ten-year period as they struggle to fulfill their roles as workers, wives, mothers, and members of an isolated community that's almost invisible to the outside world. It's an intensely personal film, born of friendships forged by filmmaker Nancy Ghertner with each of the five women, who asked to be identified simply as Soledad, Vierge, Maria, Elisa, and Lorena.

*After I Pick the Fruit* begins and ends in the apple orchards around Sodus, NY, but includes footage on location in Chilapa de Diaz, Mexico, the US-Mexican border in Texas, the orange groves of Florida, the Capitol Building in Albany, and most importantly, in the women's homes when the work day is done.

The Bush Administration's post-9/11 crackdown on illegal immigration is pivotal to the film. Ghertner shows how a series of raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in 2006 affects the women, their families, farmers, and residents in and around Sodus. When Elisa learns that her husband has been deported in an early morning raid in front of the local grocery store, she invites Ghertner into her home to talk about what happened. The film also documents the stunned reaction of the farmer who employed Lorena's husband after his deportation. Later the film follows a group of area residents who have volunteered to stand watch outside a Catholic church on Sunday mornings - on the lookout for ICE agents - while undocumented immigrants attend Mass inside.

"I was inspired to make the film after seeing women working in the fields and orchards near my hometown of Sodus," Ghertner says. "I wanted to meet them, to understand how they lived and what happened -after they picked the fruit."

Once she got to know the women, Ghertner was driven “to make the invisible visible,” and raise consciousness among American consumers about the human price of getting fresh food to the supermarket.

## THE WOMEN IN *AFTER I PICK THE FRUIT*

### SOLEDAD

For the first 18 years of her life, Soledad lived in Puebla, Mexico. Because her parents couldn't afford to keep her in school, Soledad dropped out at age 12, and went to work cleaning and cooking “in the homes of ladies” until age 17, when she met and married her husband. Not long after they were married, Soledad's husband left to find work in the United States, and Soledad supported herself by selling crackers in the street until he could send for her. Soledad and her husband eventually found work with on a fruit farm near Sodus. In 2006 - after working nine years for the same farmer - they decide to return to Mexico, weary of the anxiety caused by the ICE raids. As they approach Mexico with their two American-born children, Ghertner is there to capture the experience on both sides of the border.

### VIERGE

Vierge is one of thousands of boat people who fled Haiti after the 1991 coup that ousted Father Aristide. Under President Bill Clinton's Haitian immigration policy, only those who were likely to suffer political persecution were given documents to live and work in the U.S., and Vierge is one of the very few who qualified. Vierge settled in Florida and soon began her annual migration to New York State to pick apples. She met her husband; also a farmworker and they have two children. Vierge is herself one of nine children and

the only one to escape Haiti. She sends money to Haiti regularly to support her mother and siblings, who are unable to find work in Haiti's bleak economy.

## MARIA

Because Maria's husband was given amnesty under the 1986 Reagan plan, she was able to legally cross the border with him. The two of them migrate seasonally between New York and Florida, even after their children are born. When they first arrived in Sodus with their children, Maria says, they had no place to live, and no *padrone*, or contractor, to hire them. After eight days of homelessness, they ran into a friend from Mexico at the laundromat who put them in touch with a contractor, and moved into the only housing available: a trailer with four single men. "They were drunks," she says. "Every night there would be a fight."

## ELISA

Because she's undocumented, Elisa hasn't seen her parents, siblings, or cousins since September 11, 2001, except on video tapes Ghertner took on her own visit to Elisa's hometown, Chilapa de Diaz. Before 9/11, Elisa and other undocumented workers would cross the US-Mexican border from regularly, but tightened border security after 9/11 makes crossing too risky. Elisa feels she has no choice but to stay in the United States, even after her husband is deported. "The economy is broken in our country," she says. "We cannot survive there."

## LORENA

Lorena is working in the onion fields of western New York alongside her husband when the filmmaker is introduced to her. She and her husband met as teenagers in Hidalgo,

Mexico, and crossed the border into the US illegally together. In spite of their illegal status, Lorena and her husband long for community, and he joins the volunteer board for AgriBusiness Day Care, where their son, is enrolled. In the fall of 2006, Lorena's husband is selected to represent the parents of the AgriBusiness Day Care at a conference in Philadelphia, but when he boards a bus to attend the conference, his family's life is forever changed.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For 30 years, I lived alongside the fruit and vegetable farms in rural Western New York and experienced the influx of migrant children each fall in the rural school where I taught art. I volunteered at the community Mexican Fiesta and Haitian Night, but I knew little about the reality of the life of a farmworker. In the fall of 2000, I approached two fruit growers who owned apple orchards in the Sodus area. I explained that I was interested in filming the apple harvest, and with their support, I began this film project.

In that first season, I met three of the women - Soledad, Vierge, and Maria. As I began to witness the working lives of these women, I became interested in what forced their departures from their home countries, and what conditions drove some of them to migrate between New York and Florida. I also began to question why farmworkers - so central to the local economy in Sodus - had for years been invisible to me and to the wider community. This invisibility became a central force for the film's narrative.

These questions drove me to become actively involved with several organizations involved with farmworker issues - Rural Opportunities, the Cornell Migrant Program, Rural and Migrant Ministry, and especially the Farmworker Women's Institute, a project of Farmworker Legal Services of New York in Rochester. I was invited to join the steering committee of FWI the year it was founded. At my first meeting I met Elisa, who was also a member of the committee. She introduced me to farm work in the vineyards, and the permanent Hispanic community in my town. During the next year, I met Lorena, who spent all year in field crop agricultural labor. Through her family, I became acquainted with the Roman Catholic Migrant Ministry and its congregations.

Over the next ten years, we filmed the annual cycle of these five women's work lives – Maria, Vierge, Soledad, Lorena and Elisa. As I gained their trust, they began to reveal more of their lives – and I learned what they did after they picked the fruit. At first, they participated because they saw the film as important to me, but as the years went on, they became committed to the project, and I began to see my town through their eyes.

We were in the early stages of the film when 9/11 changed everything for Soledad, Lorena, and Elisa, because they had entered the country without documentation. The US government began to aggressively pursue “illegal aliens” and all undocumented workers were pushed into further isolation. We realized we would have to give those three women pseudonyms and withhold certain details of their lives to protect them from deportation. Despite that, the women chose to put hope above fear, and continued with the film.

The film project has been influenced and supported by an incredible group of farmers, organizations for farmworker rights and immigration reform, schools, and filmmakers. The farmers in these stories stand by their workers, and advocate for them on a daily basis. The courageous work of the Farmworker Women's Institute, Farmworker Legal Services of Western NY, Rural and Migrant Ministry, CITA (Centro Independencia Trabajadoras Agrícolas), the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, NY, and lead sponsor Wayne Action for Racial Equality (WARE) inspired and supported the film project. Innumerable hours of production support came from my colleagues and students at the School of Film and Animation at Rochester Institute of Technology.

It's hard to give enough thanks to the women and their families for their profound commitment to the film. Lastly, I want to thank my family and the Sodus Film Group, whose members believed that the stories in this film had to be told.

Maria, Vierge, Soledad, Lorena and Elisa's lives are no longer invisible. It's our hope that in experiencing their lives, a connection will be established, so that the simplistic labels "migrant" and "illegal" will be replaced by a deeper understanding of the complex lives of migrant families. We hope that you will join in the effort to give these families hope for their future.

- *Nancy Ghertner*

PRESS RELEASE

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LOCAL DOCUMENTARY ABOUT FARMWORKERS TO BE SCREENED FOR THE  
FIRST TIME AT ST. JOHN FISHER COLLEGE NOVEMBER 3

A feature-length documentary about immigrant farmworkers in Wayne County, “After I Pick the Fruit,” will be screened publicly for the first time on Thursday, November 3 at 6 p.m. in room 135, Basil Hall, on the St. John Fisher campus.

“After I Pick the Fruit” follows five immigrant farmworker women - Lorena, Vierge, Maria, Soledad and Elisa - over a ten-year period as they struggle to raise their families and find a sense of community in a world that is largely invisible to others.

“My goal was to make this invisible world visible, to bring to light the struggles of those workers who put food on our tables,” says filmmaker Nancy Ghertner, a longtime resident of Sodus and former faculty member at RIT. “The project initially arose out of my own curiosity. Driving to and from my house in Sodus, I’d see women working in the orchards and wonder, ‘What is their life like when the work day is done? Where do they live, and who takes care of their children while they’re at work?’ After I got to know the women, we formed close friendships, and mere curiosity turned into a desire to reveal these women as they really are: three-dimensional human beings who love their families, but left their home countries out of economic desperation. They’re willing to suffer isolation and long, hard hours because they’re determined to provide their children with a better life.”

The Bush administration's post-9/11 crackdown on illegal immigrants is a central event in the film and leads to great anxiety for three of the women who were in the US without documentation. When two of the women experience the deportation of their husbands, Ghertner was there to capture their emotional responses on film.

The screening at St. John Fisher is free and open to the public. For more information about the film, contact the director Nancy Ghertner at 585-732-6047, or visit the film's web site at [www.afteripickthefruit.com](http://www.afteripickthefruit.com).

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