

# Migrant Farm Workers on the Shore Are Subject of Maryland Photographer

"The first step is not the photograph," says Philip Decker. "That can only come after living and working and eating with the person. At some point the subject is not a migrant farm worker; he has become someone I know."

As a photographer, Phil Decker's goal is to photograph a relationship, rather than a face. He has chosen to photograph the relationships of migrant and seasonal farm workers. This summer, as a field representative for the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers, Inc., he had an opportunity to work toward his goal. As a result, he not only has some unique photographs, but Decker has been accepted as a student of the International Center of Photography in New York.

Decker's adventures as a photographer began some time after he had experienced the life of a migrant worker. After college, he travelled across the United States, occasionally taking on work as funds ran short. After working as an oyster shucker in Oregon and an apple picker in Washington state, Decker travelled to California. There he visited a friend who was studying photography.

While visiting his friend, Decker became interested in the intimacy of photography. He found this not only in the final product, but in the process through that was achieved. The experience prodded him to purchase his own camera, a very small, inexpensive

one, but enough to experiment with.

Decker's immediate regret was the fact that the workers he had met in Oregon and Washington had passed through his life unphotographed. The depth of experience and emotion he had seen in their faces would remain only in his memory. He was intrigued with their lifestyle—it was so different from the suburban environment he had been raised in—and became interested in relating their story to others who would otherwise never encounter it.

Somewhat idealistically, Decker packed up his belongings and started out for Mexico. His plan was to find a small village in which he could become immersed. Eventually he hoped to understand the village and tell its story through pictures.

Phil found that his first problem was finding the village he had hoped for. He

was still learning Spanish and most of the people he asked for advice directed him to "tourist traps." He looks back on the experience as a very good opportunity to perfect his Spanish. When he did find the village he had had in mind, he left without taking a picture.

This brought him back to Maryland, to visit his family, and to the Eastern Shore, to work with migrant farm workers. Because the language barrier had somewhat diminished, he became a valuable field representative and took on the task of emergency trouble shooting. He helped the workers get to work, get bus tickets, and, in general, learn how to live in America on their small incomes.

While on the Lower Shore, Decker became once again immersed in what he calls the "muck and goo" of life. He ate with the farm workers, drank with

them, and got to know them. He encountered some "freewheelers" who wandered from camp to camp perhaps running from something or someone. More often, however, he encountered workers who were heroes in a sense. Men who had left a degree relative wealth behind them in Haiti or South America in search of freedom and a better life for them and their families.

At the end of the summer, as Decker was preparing to move away from the Shore, he sat down with some of the workers, one at a time, and asked them if he could photograph them. Only when he felt he knew the individual and was no longer seeing just a character type, did he ask this.

As he sat down with his subject, Decker instructed him to imagine himself in an auditorium full of people. See MIGRANT, pg. A8, col. 5



This farmworker was one of many whose story is told by Phil Decker's photographs. (Photo by Philip Decker)

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## Southern Eastern Shore Travel Council Elects New Officers

The first full meeting of the Southern Eastern Shore Travel Council was at the Government Office Building in Salisbury recently. Newly-appointed representatives from member counties of Dorchester, Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester and Clara Wooddy, the Southern Eastern Shore representative from the Maryland Office of Tourist Development met to elect new officers for the group.

The first slate of officers for the new tourism group elected at the meeting include Betty Gardner, president; Winnie Belle LeCompte, vice president; Susan Seifried, secretary; and Janice Bennett, treasurer.

The main objective of the council is to cooperatively market and promote the region as a year-round travel destination for group tours, corporate meetings and conventions, international visitors and vacationers.

Since the formation of the travel council last fall, the group has undertaken two major cooperative projects:

A full-color promotional brochure aimed at attracting the lucrative group tour business was recently unveiled to officials from the four counties at the Maryland Association of Counties annual meeting in Ocean City. The brochure, which includes organized nature, historical and shopping tours, will serve as the major

promotional piece for an extensive marketing campaign to capture the attention of tour bus representatives, who have expressed an interest in Maryland and are looking for new "sidestep" excursions to book in conjunction with Washington/Williamsburg tours.

This summer travel council members also assisted the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company with the filming of a scenic portrait of the Southern Eastern Shore, which will be broadcast later this year on the Home Theatre Network's Travel Channel, a national network of 300 cable systems that provide family entertainment. Each is expected to air the program at least seven times the first year.

The group tour brochure was funded through a tourism grant from the Department of Economic and Community Development to Wicomico County. Funding for the \$10,000 travel film was a joint venture between Westinghouse Broadcasting Company and the town of Ocean City.

The emphasis of the travel council meeting was that through an adoption of a regional approach to promotion with a sharing of ideas, expertise, and existing funding, the Southern Eastern Shore can be more effectively marketed as a desirable travel destination.

## Migrant Workers Photographed

who had come to see the photograph; and look into the camera as he would at such people. Decker encouraged the subject to consider the picture an opportunity to tell his life without words.

With these and other photographs under his arm, Phil Decker went to New York for an interview at the International Center of Photography. The Center accepts only fifteen students each year and Decker is thrilled to be one of them. "This is real dreamy stuff right now," says Decker, who now sees only great opportunities ahead of him.

Eventually, he hopes to take what he learns at the Center and perhaps get a grant to tell the migrant farmworker story through photographs. Ideally, he would start in Florida, where most of the farmworkers start out, and follow them in their trek north. Decker plans to continue his method of slowly approaching and getting to know his subjects.

Phil Decker acknowledges that his plans are rather idealistic, but at the same time he does not discount the possibility that he will be able to fulfill

them. His enthusiasm is contagious. Talking to him, one begins to feel that this "dreamy stuff" is apt to become reality.



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