

**The Silent Community**  
**BY AILEEN SMEDY**  
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The invisible people, the people with no voice. That's what migrant workers, the harvesters of our nation's food, are called as they travel through Texas, California and Florida following the crops.

Susan Reyna of Homestead, Fla., knows that way of life well. Born in Texas, she was raised as a third-generation Mexican-American migrant farm worker, seeing the country from the back of a pickup truck. She appreciated the small things that came her way. She remembers stopping on the side of the road, eating baloney sandwiches and drinking sodas, as a real treat.

Life as a kid was kind of fun, she says, with a large extended family and a sense of community. But that life also had a down side. Ms. Reyna and others like her began working at the age of 5 or 6, picking crops alongside their parents, cooking for their families and taking care of siblings. The domestic violence she witnessed toward her mother, sisters and herself was not to be discussed.

At 19, Ms. Reyna felt her life was over. Married and divorced with two small children, a ninth-grade education, no marketable skills and low self-esteem, she felt hopeless that she could make a life for herself. That's when she encountered Organized Migrants in Community Action, a grassroots agency founded by farm workers to give a voice to this silent community.

"They saw a spark in me, they gave me an opportunity to learn and time to give back," she says. They taught her how to type and gave her a job. She went back to school, got her G.E.D. and went on to earn a college degree. Today, Ms. Reyna has in turn created the group Mujeres Unidas en Justicia, Educacion y Reforma (MUJER), or Women United in Justice, Education and Reform.

MUJER is comprised of 29 women representing 11 Hispanic *culturas*, or cultures. Most of these women, like Reyna, have come from the migrant farming community and have overcome adversities in life which made them strong and sensitive to the needs of others. Their work is aimed not only toward empowering women through domestic violence intervention but also toward promoting family through parenting, relationship and youth education programs. In the last two years, they have reached 700 people through public forums and thousands more who've contacted them individually.

At first, Ms. Reyna's attitude was that women had to stand up for themselves and tell their husbands they were not going to put up with the violence anymore. Now, after 20 years of advocacy work, she says: "You don't tell people what to do or what not to do. You show them different options and how they can take advantage of those options.... This is a way for women to be self-sufficient, so they can become change agents in their families and their communities."

Looking back at how far she has come, it seems Susan Reyna has done just that.

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