Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

If farmworkers picked the food, shouldn't they get a seat at the table?

Dwayne Betts:

Cilantro, when you pick it, the people that pick it bundle it up right there. Now, I've been in a bunch of stores and got cilantro, and I actually thought that it was magic that it appeared that way. Feels really naive now, not understanding how grueling and backbreaking that work could be.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

The cruel irony in this country is that the very people who nourish us often can't afford to put food on their own table. It makes no sense. That is a very real situation that this country has not addressed.

Dwayne Betts:

From Emerson Collective, this is Almost There. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. My guest is Diana Tellefson Torres, the executive director of the United Farm Workers Foundation.

Although you won't hear her call herself an executive director, Diana, she recognizes that more than anything else, she is an organizer. She goes where people need her.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

An organizer always listens. A worker is more than a worker. They're a human being, they have a story.

Dwayne Betts:

She works in the fields with folks, and she learns their stories and she tells their stories. And she works on federal and state levels to push policymakers to address farm worker safety and wellbeing. And learn just what goes into making those bundles of cilantro.

Diana, it is a pleasure to be speaking with you. And like most people, maybe, I walk into a grocery store and I pick up fruit and vegetables and never think about the people who did the labor to get it from a field to my plate.

And I understand that your work is really centered around working around the lives of those folks. I wondered if you could explain it to me though, because I'm going to have to explain this to my sons, and I want to have an ability to make them more educated than I was 10 minutes ago. So, how would you explain your work to a 10-year-old?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Well, that's a question I can answer, because I have young nephews and nieces.

Farm workers are the people who are picking the fruits and the vegetables that we eat every day. They're the folks who are milking the cows to bring the milk that we use for our cereal. And it's really hard work. It's not easy work, and many times it's very long hours. And those are people that we really need to honor. They're the ones that nourish us.

Dwayne Betts:

Do you actually make sure that we honor those folks? What does that mean for you?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah. Well, it's a loaded word, right? Honoring someone. But I'll say that we're doing the opposite in this country.

I'm going to get down to history here. Just put simply, we have a very racist structure that was set up, the system where farm workers were excluded from overtime pay from the National Labor Relations Act. Farm workers don't have the right to unionize at the federal level. That was based on the fact that many farm workers were African-American. They were Black in the 1930s, and Southern congressional members said that Black workers didn't deserve the same rights as white workers. Literally, that was something [inaudible 00:04:02].

Dwayne Betts:

I mean, if you start letting sharecroppers unionize, then I think the sharecroppers disappear, right?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

That's right.

Dwayne Betts:

And so, what do the sharecroppers become if they could unionize? And I guess I'm asking, in a way, what do farm workers generally become? Because I never thought about that question.

We know about peonage, we know about sharecropping, we know about these systems that follow slavery. And we know that they were hellish and that they didn't allow people the opportunity to grow and to thrive. But I think I never asked the other question. What would it mean to have some kind of vehicle for people not to be able to be sharecroppers? So if unionizing is that vehicle, what do they become?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

The beautiful thing about unionization is just having voice at the workplace. Let me just break it down.

I think a lot of people think about farm work and sharecropping or this very hard work as something of the past. These were struggles of the past. I'll hear that like, "Oh, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, yeah, that was something from the '60s. Everything's cool."

But let me tell you, just this summer, earlier this summer, I went to Georgia, South Georgia. We have two organizers out there that are working with the UFW Foundation. The stories that we were hearing were so egregious.

There was a group of women and they were telling me that they didn't have toilets. It took me aback. And so, I asked them, "So what do you do? Walk me through. What does that look like for you?" And so, some of the women were telling me that they try to hold it sometimes, which is something that's challenging because farm workers don't have overtime pay in Georgia. So, often they'll work well over eight hour days. And so-

Dwayne Betts:

Wait a minute, why would you work... So if you don't have overtime, and I get it, I should know the answer to this, but I don't. If you don't have overtime, why don't you just leave after eight hours?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Because then, you don't have a job the next day.

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, that's rough.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

You're talking about mainly immigrant workers. A large percentage of the farm workers in this country are from Mexico or other Latin American countries, but mainly Mexico. In Georgia and Florida, there's Haitian farm workers. So you're talking about a very vulnerable population of people who often, their first language isn't English.

Dwayne Betts:

And then can you just describe where they work? Because actually, I was confused a bit when you said they don't have bathrooms. I was like, "Why wouldn't you have bathrooms? How do you clock in? You have to go into the building to clock in."

But I think part of the point of this is that people are working on acres and acres of land on farms, and your workplace is outside. And so, in this place, you come there and everything is outside and there is no facilities. There is no place inside for you to go and use the bathroom and clean up for lunch. It's just outside.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah. I mean, you typically would see porta-potties, right? It is very much outdoors. It's isolated work. And so, here in California, you'll see porta-potties that are set up that workers will go and use the restroom there.

Dwayne Betts:

And they don't even have porta-potties.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Oh, no. They do not have porta potties. And so, what I was hearing from these women is that... Because that was my first time in South Georgia, I got to see these huge fields, but then there's forest right next to the field. These huge trees. And so the women were telling me, "Well, we have to walk over to where the trees are out in the forest and go to the restroom there so no one can see us. But there's snakes. And so, we also fear maybe getting bitten by a snake."

Dwayne Betts:

Has anybody ever been bitten by snakes?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

And so there are stories of people who have gotten bitten by snakes. And so, they were telling me all about it. I asked the same question.

But it was also the issue of just the lack of dignity. And women have different needs. You have menstruation issues. It's just revolting to me that an employer would not offer any worker the ability to

just go to the restroom. And so, you're talking about something that just... It's law. They have to provide bathrooms.

And so, it's an issue of not following the law, which leads to also the enforcement of the law, because there are huge, isolated areas that many of the investigators from the Department of Labor, other agencies like OSHA, that often don't go out. There aren't enough investigators, we're often told. But the mere fact that employers think they can get away with it is so egregious. It's also a food safety issue. As a consumer, I'm appalled.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah. I mean, even with porta potties, with them not having... I once was getting transferred from one prison to another one, and it was a long, long ride. And we were confronted with 17 hours to get from the one spot to the next. And you're shackled and handcuffed, and your impulse is just to hold it because they're not going to take the shackles or the handcuffs off of you to go to the bathroom.

And so, in some ways, I feel like it's similar. It's not that I could go to the woods and go, it's just that for me to go when they stopped, we had to go to the porta potty. And I went. And I was just so disgusted by having to go. And I'd go into the porta potty and I use the bathroom, but then you can't wash your hands.

And we got back on the van to continue our journey from one prison to the next, and then they gave us lunch. I was like, "I'm not eating this." And it is just so undignifying to imagine having to go through that. And imagine having to go through that for your work.

But it's also interesting here, you talk about what is a profoundly unsettling issue. And I wonder, what stories do you hear? I need to, again, go back to the ten-year-old and I'm explaining this to my kid and I'm telling them what goes on. It sounds like you know these people with a fair amount of intimacy. And so I wonder, how did you go about getting that? How did you go about getting that close to these folks?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

An organizer always listens. A worker is more than a worker. They're a human being. They have a story. They have things that they're going through. I'll give you an example.

In this trip to Georgia, I wanted to see workers while they were working. And so, went out to squash field and was walking alongside one of the workers as he was grabbing the squash, throwing them into a bin, and very quickly cutting it. So, I knew I was disturbing. Some farm workers get paid with how much they actually pick. This guy was being really, really kind and just having the discussion with me. So I was asking him, "How long have you been doing this?" And he was telling me about the number of years he's been working as a farm worker in Georgia. And I said, "How long have you been in Georgia?"

He's like, "Oh, no. Well, I came from Mexico, and it's been about 25 years since I've seen any of my family members." I was like, "Ah, you don't have papers, huh?" He was like, "No." It's the thing that gets me the most. That, "I haven't seen my mother in a quarter of a century." I said, "Do you feel that you would want to hear more information about the immigration campaign that we're doing to get immigration reform passed at the federal level?" And I just saw his face light up at the same time that I saw doubt. Like, "Man, that would be nice" and "How is that going to happen?" There's so many years that we've been trying to get this through.

And so, I just kept asking him about his family and where he was living at that time. And I think people have these stories of resilience that just keep me going. You're seeing this work that's being done that is something that I know would be incredibly challenging on my own body if I was working 12, 14, 16-hour days. I've heard of workers working that long. And yet, I know that it's important to ensure that those

workers feel that they could be part of something larger than themselves, that that's what this movement's about. That systemic change doesn't happen right away, but if you don't try, then nothing's going to change.

And so, I think building that trust and building those relationships with the very workers who are doing some of the hardest work in this country, to me, is invaluable. That is the crux of the work that we do as organizers. But I've gotten to see those workers who are speaking with the Secretary of Labor and telling him, "No, you don't understand. This is what it's like."

Dwayne Betts:

It's interesting, right? Because it's all of these different layers, both of the experience, from physically what it's like to pick squash, to pick radish and bundle the radish, to pick cilantro and bundle the cilantro. There's also these personal stories, the idea that you might not have seen your family in a quarter of century because you don't have papers.

But then, I'm sure it's also other stories of just the inner workings of people's lives. You have children, you have grandchildren, you have grandparents, you have friends, you have this community. I wonder where you would point me to, so that I feel less distance between the stories that you've told me now, and the lives of the folks that have lived those stories.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah. I'm going to say that I'm always super excited to see all the different videos that farm workers post up on our social media or they share with us. They're putting videos up on social media of what it's like to bundle up cilantro and what it's like to-

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, they bundle up the cilantro on the ground?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, I didn't know that.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah. The children of farm workers also, who are also very digitally savvy, who have worked on advocacy campaigns, have gone to Washington DC with their parents or have gone on behalf of their parents to share their stories. They'll use their camera on their phone to do a day in the life of their parents and what that looks like. I would say that it's just visually very powerful. It's our job to really uplift those stories of farm workers, showing what is the work that they're doing.

Dwayne Betts:

It seems like you're deeply motivated to do something in the face of a kind of cruelty to people who are vital to this country. As you travel around from place to place with that message, I guess my question ultimately is, what pushes you to do that? Where did this deep sense of commitment and duty that I could just hear in your voice as you talk about this, where did that come from?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

The wonderful thing about doing the work that I do is that nothing ever seems so hard because I've literally watched people do some of the hardest work, and I think I have an easy job in comparison. And I'll say just on a very personal level, my grandfather was a guest worker in the Bracero program. He came to the US.

My mom grew up in Chihuahua, Mexico, and she always would tell me stories of feeling loneliness as a child because both of her parents weren't home. Her dad would be gone for months on end, her mom had to figure out work. And so often, she'd be left with family members. And I always got this sense of this loneliness that my mom experienced that was deep. When I think about my grandfather, I wonder what was it like for him. And I never got to hear.

He's since passed away. I was still fairly young, but it never occurred to me to ask him what he was doing in the US. I just knew he would come to work here. And it wasn't until I started talking to my eldest uncle who mentioned, "Oh, so great that you're doing this work. Your grandpa was going to the US to work in agriculture." I didn't know until I was already working here. So it's kind of one of those things, where the universe put me here. I deeply feel that this is the work I'm meant to do.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah. That makes me think in a completely different way about the story collection and about the children being able to play a role in this movement, because they could go and they could tell their parents' stories and they could teach their folks how to use technology. And I do think, yeah, we think about the weight of all of this and we think about how it carries this meaning, but sometimes, we think about it as being essentialist. But it feels like it is much more expansive than that. It feels like it's actually about how it allows us to remember our history.

We started with history. We started with Chavez in the 1930s, but I think when you think about that, you're not just talking about farm workers' movement, but you're talking about this expansive collection of families that sometimes become invisible to each other.

And you talk about it in the context of Caesar Chavez too, so it's clearly this lineage of doing this work. Can you explain, just for a second, tutorial on what it means to be an organizer, particularly in this space? What do you see your duty as? And I know that you hold fast to your identity as an organizer, when you could have said executive director, right?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

But it feels like your passion, it feels like you see that as your first identity. So, could you just talk a little bit about what that means?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah. An organizer is someone who, first and foremost, listens. When we're talking with workers, we don't go and tell them what they need. We need to listen to hear what they need from their own words. What are the experiences that they're having? What's the change they want to see in the world? It's a relationship that you're building with individuals, with communities.

There's this level of understanding that, as an organizer, you're helping a community, individuals, workers, come up with their own solutions to solve problems that they see on the ground. And so

collectively, you're trying to bring together folks to work through how to make the change happen that they want to see at their workplace or that they want to see in their community. So you're more of like a facilitator.

Dwayne Betts:

Okay. In this work though, when has that led you to say, "So this is really what y'all want? Because I would've thought you wanted this. But okay, that's what we're going to do." When have you been surprised, where you going on the ground and you go in with years and years of experience, you go in with years of experience and organizing in other communities too, communities that you might've thought were similar, and it's like, "Well, they wanted this," and you would just assume that this other community that seems to be similarly situated wants the same thing and you go in... I don't know how I would respond to the people wanting something for themselves that I feel might be misguided or misplaced.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah, and I'm going to say one of the things that we always say that comes from our beautiful history, is that every worker is an organizer.

I think there's a lot of nuance to your question. I would say that part of the work that is done on the ground is also this sharing of information. What we run into is that many farm workers often don't have all of the information about what their labor rights are sometimes. They don't have a good grasp of what the employer should be doing by law. They have a sense that they're doing stuff that they shouldn't be doing often. Wage theft. There's all kinds of nonsense happening in addition to egregious things, like I mentioned, like not having toilets in South Georgia.

That's part of the reason, when we do house meetings, for instance, that's one of the first steps where you have a worker goes and gets some of their friends, some of their neighbors, family members to come and be in this discussion where they're sharing what are all the issues or experiences that they have. I would say just about every conversation that I have, immigration comes into play. That fear, that rooted fear in, "I don't have papers" or "One of my family members doesn't have papers. I don't want to risk it." In all of these different conversations, we really are looking at some priority areas that the farm worker movement is working on, immigration reform being one of them.

And so, introducing, "By the way, this is some of the work that we're doing at the federal level. This and this and this, and this is what this particular bill says. And would love to hear more of your stories. Would you like to share your story with a congressional member?" You have to get the trust of that person to... And sometimes it takes many meetings, sometimes it takes just really being on the ground with that person to realize, "Can I speak to a congressional member? Shoot!"

And to get someone to that point where they're ready to speak to a politician, a decision maker, about something that's so vulnerable is incredible. I definitely feel that often, when we're speaking with workers, issues come up where they're either not getting paid well, hours are being stolen. Basically, they are paid something less than what they actually worked. Sometimes it's about verbal abuse. Called nasty names. If you're not working fast enough, they call it [foreign language 00:24:41]. If you're constantly told, "You're not going fast enough, you're not going fast enough, you're not going fast enough." Lack of water.

Dwayne Betts:

You told a story... I heard you speak before, and I never forgot the story, but it was about somebody who was working, I want to say, with oranges. Picking oranges. And that he needed water and that he ended up dying.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Yeah. We've had many, many farm worker deaths. Unfortunately, it is one of the most dangerous jobs. And especially because workers are often outdoors, they're exposed to the sun. We're talking about it's hot days often, and you're working more than eight-hour days, more so than not. I must say, here in California, we went overtime pay in 2016. So this is the only state where farm workers get paid after 40 hours' worth of work. But in most other states, that's not the case.

Dwayne Betts:

I mean, that's really impressive. But it's actually, in some ways, more so tragic for how impressive it is. It literally shouldn't be impressive. But to say that it's only one state where you get overtime, and most of us would never imagine working a labor job and not get overtime.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

I was speaking on a panel at the White House Conference of Hunger, Nutrition, and Health, and I mentioned in opening my comments that the cruel irony in this country is that the very people who nourish us often can't afford to put food on their own table. It makes no sense. That is a very real situation that this country has not addressed.

Dwayne Betts:

I have one more question for you. You go into these conversations, and the truth is... I mean, I care now from talking to you. But I'm a poet. I think we, as artists, don't ask this of ourselves enough. What is my duty to the concerns of the world?

And I guess I would ask you, what do you think the duties that the artist has? Because your duty to this work is so profoundly evident that I find it inspiring. But I also find it making me want to ask you, what is the artist's duty to the work that you're doing? For the folks who be listening to this, well, actually I'm asking for myself. I got to do something to honor what you've done. So I'm like, what is my duty?

Diana Tellefson Torres:

As consumers, we all eat. That's just the bottom line. Being aware of what are the products that are union products. Looking for that label is important. Just like putting your dollars next to, what are the companies that are doing the right thing?

I talked about a lot of egregious stuff that I've been seeing, but there are solutions. Farm workers... I didn't even mention this. I should have mentioned this earlier, but farm workers literally just marched from Delano, California to Sacramento, over 300 miles in the summer heat, over a hundred degree days, to get the signature from Governor Newsom to sign our bill to make it easier for farm workers to be able to unionize in California.

It's one of the only states that has now a law that allows farm workers to unionize, but it's not working. Farm workers have to go into the fields at their workplace to vote for union when supervisors are not that far away. So the level of intimidation to even just show up to vote is enormous. And so, we ended up winning, through legislation, the ability for farm workers to vote by mail. Vote from home to be able to join a union. Supporting campaigns like that, really being mindful of, what else can I do to be a

supporter of this movement? Everyone can play an amazing role in contacting their legislators, contacting their Congress members. Stay engaged because we need more of that.

Dwayne Betts:

I'm glad I asked you that, and I'm glad for your answer. I was afraid that you were going to ask me to write a sonnet.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

That too. I expect it next week!

Dwayne Betts:

But no, this was a lovely and a deeply meaningful conversation for me, and I appreciate your time.

Diana Tellefson Torres:

Thank you for having me.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsome at Magnificent [inaudible 00:29:44] for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Brianna Garrett, and Paul Schneider, along with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon, and Amy Loeb from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.