

Getting to Know the Professional behind the Work

Interview with Olga Ruiz
State Monitor Advocate, Colorado

Let's start with some information about your position and the nature of your work.



I am the State Monitor Advocate for the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. My work takes me out to the farms and fields where our food is grown. This is an important job because I assist both growers and farmworkers. I provide growers with information on changing laws and help them find farmworkers. I help farmworkers navigate programs in order to reach their goals and access services that they need.

Olga Ruiz with Juan M. Regalado, USDOL, National Monitor Advocate, at a migrant appreciation picnic at Manzanola, Colorado in 2012

Tell us about your journey. How did you get here?

My parents were migrant farmworkers that traveled from Texas to Colorado each year. I am the second youngest of nine children. My first memory of working in the fields, when I was around five years old, was all fun and games. I would play in the dirt at the end of the field and when my dad would whistle for some water, I would hurry up and bring them some cold water.

Once I was old enough to tell the difference between a weed and a plant, I would help them thin and weed sugar beets, harvest onions, and pack potatoes. I was eight years old when I started working in the fields with my parents during the summer breaks from school. We settled in Colorado when one of the farmers we worked for offered my family the use of the farmhouse year round. I learned at an early age that if you want something in life, you have to work for it. I also learned to have pride in my work no matter what type of work I was doing. My siblings and my parents are great role models for me. They are hardworking people that always put family first. My parents understood that their children needed an education to get them ahead in life. They always made sure to keep us grounded.



KATHRYN SCOTT / Greeley Tribune

Olga Lopez, left, now helps others find better jobs like Linda Lopez, no relation.

Ex-migrant now helps workers

By PATRICK MEIGHAN
Tribune Staff Writer

Olga Lopez, 25, keeps in her car a Polaroid snapshot of a friend dressed in graduation cap and gown.

The friend, one of the first migrant teen-agers that Lopez tutored at Milliken Middle School, graduated this past spring from Roosevelt High School in Johnstown.

Lopez is proud to have played a part in helping her friend break out of the migrant stream. A former fieldworker herself, she knows how tough breaking away can be and how the help of others can make the difference.

Until age 12, Lopez traveled between Texas and Colorado each year. When her father was hired by the Great Western Sugar Co., the family settled in Johnstown. But Lopez, four siblings and her mother still worked in the fields. Her father — who got a job with the Rio Grande Railroad after Great Western folded — helped out on weekends.

It's easy to stick with fieldwork when that's what you know, Lopez says. You get hired on the spot, paid every day. "Maybe that's why people don't try other things," she says.

After high school, Lopez worked for two years as a bilingual tutor with her alma mater, Johnstown-Milliken School District

Re-5J. She tutored children from migrant families in English, math, social studies, science, language arts and nonacademic subjects such as needlepoint.

Still, during summers she was out in the fields topping onions.

Former Roosevelt High School Principal Ben Hicks helped her get the job as a bilingual tutor. Lopez also credits business teacher Mary Kay Flack for helping her to find jobs outside of fieldwork.

But before them, Lopez's parents encouraged her to stay in school so she could get a better job.

Lopez was a good student, always maintaining at least a B average. "I always loved school," she says.

Lopez now works as a migrant outreach worker with Employment Services of Weld County. She is one of many former migrant workers who have turned their energies to helping people still in the migrant stream.

She gets mad at some people's reaction when they see truckloads of migrants coming into the county. She hears some say, "Here they come to get welfare," or "Here they come to take our jobs."

That's not true — migrants work hard for a living, and the difficult jobs they take most other people don't want, Lopez says.

"It's maddening, because I've been there."

My siblings and I were enrolled in the Migrant Education program and were able to get some assistance from them. Summer school with the Migrant Education program was fun but only a short reprieve since it did not operate all summer. Between going to school and working during the summers, I learned to really enjoy my time reading and attending school. I enjoyed extracurricular activities such as volleyball, choir, and joining the Future Business Leaders of American club and the Spanish Club. When I was in high school I learned to type really fast and appreciated my business classes. This gave me hope that I would someday work in a place where I would be indoors and not get my hands dirty. My business teacher got me my first non-farm job with the local cable company as a billing clerk. I worked in the afternoons during the school year and also worked one full summer.

Newspaper clipping from 1990 describing Olga's work with the children of migrant farmworkers

After I graduated from high school, I got married and had my first child. Out of the blue I received a call from the Migrant Education program with a job offer. I learned that my high school principal believed I would be a good fit and had recommended me for the position. I worked as a temporary records clerk for the summer. This provided me with experience that

helped me get a job with the school district that I graduated from. I worked as the Executive Secretary to the Director of Bilingual Education and then as a Para-Professional teaching middle school migrant children, English, science, and math in order to be able to integrate them into the regular classroom. Working for the school district freed up my summers, and to make a little extra money, my mother and I worked in the onion fields. At this time my father had been able to get a stable job with a railroad company.

When I left the school district, I applied for a temporary position with the local Workforce Center and was hired. After one month as a temp, a position for an Outreach Worker opened. I got the position and learned my new job by reading a huge book called the Federal Register. Thank God I enjoyed reading or I would never have been able to get through the reading material. My outreach career lasted 22 years – 12 years with Weld County and 10 years with Adams County. During my time in Adams County, and as my children got older, I was able to start attending college. I enrolled in college full time to complete an Associates degree while still working full time and raising my family. But I could not have done it without the help of my wonderful husband.

I have now been the State Monitor Advocate for the State of Colorado for 10 years. I have worked in this program for a total of 32 years, but if I were to really think about it, I have worked in this industry my whole life.

During your 32 years with the Monitor Advocate System, does any incident or experience stand out for you?

Yes, the value of keeping records. I was working as an Outreach Worker when I did a housing inspection at a labor camp where we had placed some farmworkers. The housing was in very poor shape with mold in the bathroom and walls of the building. The Farm Labor Contractor (FLC) knew about these issues but housed farmworkers there anyway. I told the FLC that the housing was uninhabitable and that he needed to fix these issues. I wrote up an Apparent Violation and logged it at the local American Job Center. I later found out that the FLC was under investigation by various agencies including Wage and Hour for withholding wages of the farmworkers and labor trafficking. When the Department of Labor and the county prosecutors built their case, they used my record of the Apparent Violation as part of the evidence to bring charges against the Contractor. After a court battle, the farmworkers got justice



Olga in a Toscano Kale field in Longmont, Colorado

and the labor camp was demolished. Today, a park is in its place. I share this case with outreach workers as a reason and a cautionary tale about keeping timely and accurate written records.

You can read more about the case here: [Fields of fear for Colorado illegal farm laborers](#)

What contributed to your success? Did you have any support to get to where you are today?

I think that any success I have has come from my background in farm work. It is so important to be able to put yourself in others' shoes to know where they are coming from. It helps build rapport with not only farmworkers but also with employers. Gaining the trust of your customer base is so important because without trust you cannot gain their respect. But again, I could not have done any of this without my support system.

I received a lot of support throughout the years. My support began with my family, it continued with my educators, and then I received support from my employers and colleagues. My first non-family champion was my High School business teacher, Mary Kay Flack, who saw more in me than just another student. She saw in me the need to get ahead in life. My High School Principal,



Ben Hicks, who remembered me a whole year after my graduation and continued to help me get ahead also played a big part in where I am today. The State Monitor Advocate team during my early years, Lupe Garcia Fenters, and David Rangel, the FLC Coordinator, taught me about the program and showed me how to walk that fine line between working with employers and assisting farmworkers. Lupe was instrumental in making sure I knew my job and continued to help me develop professionally via trainings. She helped me interpret the information that I learned in the Federal Register. She is one of the reasons I make sure our current outreach workers receive at least two trainings per year.

Olga with a farmworker, Maria, cutting and packing kale in the field

Do you believe your journey shaped the insight and skills you bring to your current role? In other words, what's your super power?

I believe every person's journey shapes the person that they have become or will become. It is true in my case as well. I do not believe that I could be as empathetic and understanding of situations I come across, if I had not come from that background. I would not have learned to

respect my elders and respect authority, if it had not been for my parents. I would not have learned the value of a hard day's work, pride in my work, and have a work ethic, had it not been for farm work. I would not have learned to keep myself informed of laws and regulations, if it had not been for my early days as an outreach worker.

What's my super power? Well I would have to say that it is the ability to put myself in other people's shoes, to lead from the heart, collaborate, and give my all. I am ready to give a hand, whether it is to my colleagues, my family, my friends, or a stranger. I guess that is what advocacy is all about.

I like to say that I have come full circle in my career. From working in the fields, to helping migrant children learn English, to helping their parents obtain work, training and services, to then helping out at the state level to try and make a difference for the betterment of the farmworker program.

Is there anything you would like to share?

As I had mentioned before, I had many champions in my life. I would not be where I am today without every single one of them. And I am not forgetting all those bumps in the road. It would not be a very interesting journey without side trips or pit stops.

My position has allowed me to work and collaborate with many great farmworker champions. It is my honor to work with each one of them and I am so thankful for them all. Those such as my Colorado outreach workers, who always put their best foot forward and



Farmworkers harvesting greens in Colorado

show the passion they have for the farmworker population; to their leaders, who make sure that they have the ability to do their jobs by providing them with the tools and the support that is necessary to succeed; and to my leadership team, who understands the importance of my program and allows me to show what can be accomplished together. And lastly, I am thankful for the farmers and farmworkers who are up every day at the crack of dawn to put food on our tables.