



# SOL

UNC IS ONE OF ONLY FOUR UNIVERSITIES CHOSEN TO HELP RETRACE AND RECORD THE RICH HISTORY OF **THE BRACERO PROGRAM** FOR THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL SOLOWAY

*Eyes* may be the windows to the soul, but it's a person's hands that truly tell their story.

Jessica Demoret sits quietly in the basement of the Greeley History Museum, a faithfully restored brick building downtown that was once home to the Greeley Tribune. Today, like most Tuesdays and Thursdays this semester, the UNC senior's hands are covered by white gloves. The gloves protect the yellowing letters, and black and white photos she moves into piles on the reference li-

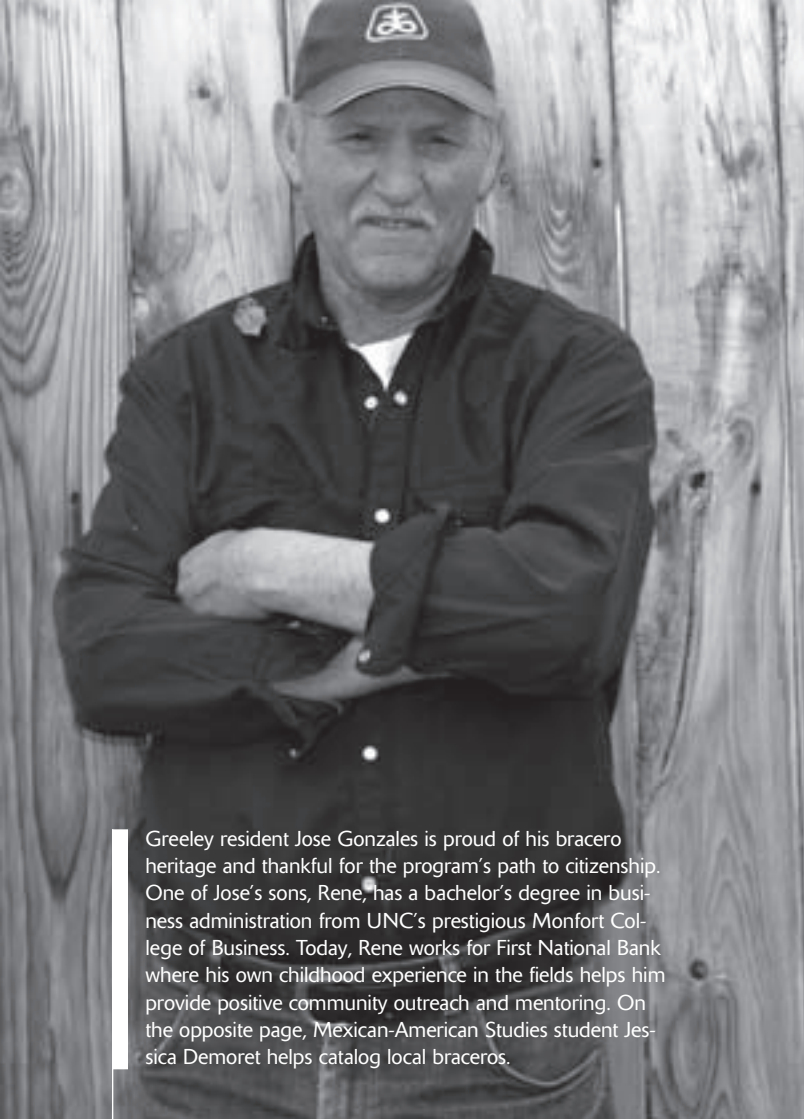


Pictured from left, Ruben and Maria Ramirez of Johnstown talk about his four years as a bracero and share family photos with Priscilla Falcon, UNC director of Mexican-American Studies.

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brary's oversized wooden desks. Demoret is a Mexican-American Studies major. She relishes the opportunity to uncover and catalog local braceros—or farm workers—who migrated to northern Colorado through the Bracero program, the 20th century's largest guest worker program.

This is painstaking, delicate work, but Demoret is precise, careful and has a passion for history. A first-generation college student, she cites her involvement in this national research project as the inspiration for her to continue her education after she graduates from UNC this month. She wants to study immigration law in



Greeley resident Jose Gonzales is proud of his bracero heritage and thankful for the program's path to citizenship. One of Jose's sons, Rene, has a bachelor's degree in business administration from UNC's prestigious Monfort College of Business. Today, Rene works for First National Bank where his own childhood experience in the fields helps him provide positive community outreach and mentoring. On the opposite page, Mexican-American Studies student Jessica Demoret helps catalog local braceros.



the next few years. "I think the Chicano movement is an important part of American history," says Demoret. "It should be treated like any other civil rights movement. Their personal struggle has always been for better wages, better housing for their families and better education for their children."

*The Bracero program* was a "win-win" proposition established by the United States government in 1942 because of labor shortages caused by World War II. Mexico saw the program as a contribution to the war effort and Mexican peasants, desperate for cash, were willing to take jobs at wages scorned by most Americans. Although the program began as a temporary measure, it became a fixture of our country's agricultural landscape until it was finally terminated in 1964.

Participation in the bracero program was limited to agricultural workers. In all, more than 4.5 million contracts were granted during the 22 years the guest worker program existed. The braceros' presence had a significant effect on the business of farming, especially in Colorado, where the thriving sugar beet industry helped support the cattle industry.

Despite its necessity and good intentions, several groups concerned about the exploitation of bracero workers tried to repeal the program. Prospective braceros were often asked to

show their calloused hands to prove that they were experienced farm laborers. Braceros were taken to processing centers where they were searched for contraband and sprayed with DDT by Department of Agriculture personnel. Workers were fingerprinted as part of the processing procedure and forced to use short-handled hoes because farm owners believed it made workers more careful and kept crops from being damaged. Regardless of one's opinion, the Bracero program had a profound effect on Mexican-American migration that persists to this day.

Demoret thinks the program created nothing more than legal slave labor. "Nobody wanted to take responsibility for the failures of the Bracero program," she says. "The bottom line is, they were human beings. All anyone has to do is take the time to get to know Latinos, their culture and their traditions. It's OK to speak two languages . . . their 'American Dream' is not to work in our kitchens and fields. It's just that they want to feed their children and take care of their families. It's what we all want. It's as simple as that."

*Since 1956*, when photographer Leonard Nadel was hired to document the bracero working conditions, not much has been done to catalog the program's history. In a partner-

ship among George Mason University's Center for History and New Media, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, the University of Texas at El Paso and Brown University, the University of Northern Colorado will help develop the Bracero History Archive, which will include recordings and transcripts of interviews with program participants, photographs, documents and other files related to the Bracero program.

Priscilla Falcon, director of Mexican-American Studies at UNC, says there are three main goals of the new partnership—to go into the Greeley community to establish a "foundation of research," to create a database of local braceros for inclusion at the Smithsonian, and to present gathered information and stories at a national convention with other scholars from across the country who are also studying bracero migratory patterns. "This is a special project for me," says Falcon. "Both of my parents were migrant workers. I started helping in the fields when I was nine, picking peas all day and filling lard buckets. I did this for years, even throughout high school, working the potato crops each summer."

Falcon points out that political debates surrounding immigration tend to move in cycles. "In 1915, there was no border policy," she says. "Anyone could move back and forth across the border." Falcon does not suggest that that would work today, but says like any race-related issues our country still faces, education and tolerance are key to understanding and change. Part of that education means educating today's youth about the past and sharing success stories of those who obeyed the rules and have created generations of thriving children and grandchildren.

Jose Gonzales' story begins in 1944, in Tepatitlan, Jalisco. One of 13 brothers and sisters, Gonzales lived on a small ranch in Mexico growing up. Soon after the second grade, Gonzales left school to help his father on their family farm. At just 6-years old, his main job was tending to weeds, which meant he became "very good with the hoe," he says. As years went by and jobs became scarce, friends convinced him to move north. After one season harvesting cotton in Ciudad Obregon, Sonora, a Letter of Certification would qualify him to become a bracero.

"We called the Bracero program, El Control [The Control],"

## Links to the Past

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Bracero and a pictorial history of the program, please visit the Smithsonian Institution on the web at [http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/themes/story\\_51\\_5.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/themes/story_51_5.html).

For updates from all of the project's participating universities, please visit each school's web site at the following links:

**Brown University:** [www.brown.edu/Administration/News\\_Bureau/2006-07/06-149.html](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/News_Bureau/2006-07/06-149.html)

**George Mason University:** <http://chnm.gmu.edu/>

**University of Texas at El Paso:** <http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=20018>

remembers Gonzales. "I joined the braceros out of necessity. We were paid about 50 cents an hour. When the patron [boss] would give us a check, we would buy some supplies and send the rest of the money back home. All of the braceros I worked with did the same. We all sent money home to help our families. I worked from sol to sol, or sunup to sundown. We all did."

Today, Gonzales, 63, owns a home in Greeley and is a naturalized U.S. citizen thanks to the Bracero program and its path to citizenship. His family includes nine children, many of whom are first-generation college graduates, and University of Northern Colorado students and alumni. Son, Rene, is a small



business lender at First National Bank, formerly 1st Union Colony Bank in Greeley. A graduate of UNC's prestigious Monfort College of Business, Rene is currently pursuing his master's in business administration. Rene credits his sense of values and strong work ethic to his father. Growing up, Rene remembers working in the fields after school and during every summer vacation. "In the agricultural industry, it's a fairly simple equation—the more sacks you produce, the more money you make," he says. "I also remember cleaning ditches on O street. In the distance you can see some of the UNC buildings on the horizon. That was always another constant reminder of where both my father and I wanted me to end up."

As a member of the Latino Advisory Committee for Greeley Museums and Jesus Rodarte Cultural Center, Rene participates in a number of community outreach activities, mentoring youth throughout Greeley to make sure they stay on the right path. Admittedly, Rene says many Latino father figures show little emotion. "It takes a strong person to walk into a new culture, not know the language, and try to build a life. But little emotion does not mean caring little."

The United States has often been called a nation of immigrants, and most families have stories about immigration and migration in their immediate or distant past. But the origins of immigrants to the United States and their experiences vary considerably. Many of their stories are filled with pain, but also hope. You can see it in their hands. And, if you take the time to look, you can also see it in their eyes. **NV**