Eyes may be the windowsto 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 library’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
the next few years. “I think the Chicano movement is an im-
portant part of American history,” says Demoret. “It should be
treated like any other civil rights movement. Their personal
failures of the Bracero program,” she says. “The bottom line is,
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.”

Demoret thinks the program created nothing more than le-
gal 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 de-
velop the Bracero History Archive, which will include record-
ings 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 inclu-
sion at the Smithsonian, and to present gathered informa-
tion 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 immi-
grantation 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 to-
day, 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 Tépaltitlán, 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
make it better because the hoe gives them little emotion,” he says. “As years
went by and jobs became scarce, friends convinced him to
move north. After one season harvesting cotton in Cuidad
Obrégon, Sonora, a Letter of Certification would qualify him to
become a bracero.

“We called the Bracero program, El Control,” says
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 natu-
ralized 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 Col-
ony Bank in Greeley. A graduate of UNC’s prestigious Monfort
College of Business, Rene works for First National Bank, formerly 1st Union Col-
lege of Business. Today, Rene works for First National Bank,
where his own childhood experience in the fields helps him
provide greater empathy to his customers and stretches the
read of the story.

The Bracero program was a “win-win” propo-
sition 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 agri-
cultural landscape until it was finally terminated in 1964.
Participation in the bracero program was limited to agri-
cultural 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
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