

## Getting to Know the Professionals Behind the Work

Interview with Francisca Rios  
Agriculture & Foreign Labor Services Program Manager

Interviewer: Laura Ibañez, Unit Chief, Specialty National Programs, Office of Workforce Investment Employment and Training Administration, Department of Labor

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

I am the Program Manager for Agriculture & Foreign Labor Services at the North Carolina Department of Commerce, Division of Workplace Solutions. My work is very important because it serves and allows me to advocate for a very special population that is often underrepresented – migrant and seasonal farmworkers (MSFW) – and agricultural employers.



**Tells us about your journey. How did you get here?**

I was born to migrant farmworker parents in Florida. My parents often moved from state to state to follow agricultural work. I was 13 years old when we made North Carolina our permanent home. My first job was harvesting blueberries. Throughout the years, I have always remembered what it felt like growing up in a migrant farmworker family. We went through tough times, but we also had beautiful moments. One of my favorite memories is going to the field located at the back of a migrant labor camp to climb hay bales. I would climb them early in the morning and read my books. To me there was nothing better than catching a beautiful sunrise on a fresh morning while sitting on a hay bale and reading a book!

When I was in high school, I benefited from various programs that were available to MSFW families. I was a participant in the National Farmworker Jobs Program's (NFJP), Migrant Education Program, Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF), and the Action, Inspiration, Motivation (AIM) Club through Telamon Corporation of North Carolina. I participated in afterschool programs where I received assistance with homework and tutoring in classes in which I struggled. In addition, I participated in other student clubs, field trips, and conferences that truly helped me overcome my shyness and gain confidence during my high school years.

In my early years, I remember dreaming of becoming a model. Shortly after graduating from high school, I even auditioned for John Casablanca's modeling company in Raleigh, only to find out that it was not what I wanted. Not only was the cost a challenge, but also the strict standards and guidelines did not let me be who I was, and discouraged me from pursuing this career. I wanted to make a difference in my community and I felt that modeling would not give me that opportunity.

I enrolled in college to pursue a degree in Education. I worked as a kindergarten teacher's assistant and in child care for a couple of years, but felt that I was still not accomplishing what I wanted. I kept looking for my true passion, and today, I am proud to say that I found it. It's been 10 years since I began working for the State Workforce Agency where I've held different job titles. I can truly say that I love my job and the people with whom I work and serve.

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

There were several people who provided me with much needed support throughout my journey. Tammy Alston was the very first person to make a difference in my life. I believe her support with NFJP services helped me enhance my work skills and gain confidence in myself. I was able to gain work experience, which later gave me the opportunity to get a job with the North Carolina State Workforce Agency as a temporary outreach worker. The job was for only 15 weeks, but as soon as I started the job, I knew that I loved it!



Before the temporary assignment ended, I was hired for a permanent job with the county health department. However, I found myself unemployed after a couple of years. I remembered the One Stop Career Centers services (thanks to outreach staff I had met in the past) and decided to visit one to do a

job search. To my surprise, there was a listing for a temporary outreach worker. I applied and got the job in 2008. I worked as a temporary employee for about two years before getting a permanent outreach worker position.

Within a few years, I was promoted to several positions within the One Stop Career Center, including the Agricultural Employment Consultant, Agricultural Field Supervisor, State Monitor Advocate, and most recently, Program Manager. I never imagined that I would end up with a permanent job with the State Workforce Agency. Overall, I believe that my desire to succeed, my initiative, and passion for my job helped my supporters believe in me and enabled me to climb the ladder of success. I could not have done this without their support.

**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 that my background as a farmworker and my experiences throughout my life, from being a participant of MSFW programs such as the NFJP, to my outreach worker positions with the State Workforce Agency, have helped me gain knowledge and insight into the agricultural community. I understand the challenges that both farmworkers and agricultural employers face

in this industry. I believe that both are equally important. They need each other in order to be successful; one cannot succeed without the other. The agricultural employers create jobs for the farmworkers, and the farmworkers harvest their crops. I believe my experiences help me perform two important and balanced roles to help both farmworkers and agricultural employers; ensuring protections for farmworkers and not hurting agricultural employers while enforcing the law.

### **Is there anything else you would like to share?**

I want to say thank you to the amazing people that made a difference in my life. Mrs. Tammy Alston, with Telamon Corporation (NFJP); Garry Terry and Ed Bengtson, Agricultural Services field supervisors, Karen Gay, Benji Leggett, Louise Joyner, Laurie Green, Maria Rojas and all the Agricultural Services field staff for their current support with North Carolina Department of Commerce, Division of Workforce Solutions and for everything they do to keep the Agricultural Services Program going. But especially I want to thank Mr. Truett Underhill, and Mr. William “Bubba” Grant; two great leaders with the NC Department of Commerce (both have retired) who contributed so much to my success. They both believed in me and helped me get where I am today. It was truly an honor to work for these two wonderful leaders, not only because they believed in me, but they also prepared me to become a leader. I learned so much from them and I hope that one day I become a successful leader and can make a difference in the lives of others as they have done. They left me with a great amount of knowledge that I know will continue to help me throughout my career.



Also, to outreach staff across the country, I thank you for everything that you do. Never underestimate your power to help others, for you truly make a difference and the work that you do is very important and unique. Always remember that

farmwork is decent and admirable work, and for some people it is their true passion. Farmworkers and farmers deserve the same respect and admiration as other occupations. It is hard work and requires a lot of strength and abilities that many of us lack. Agriculture is very important, without it, we would not have food on our tables, or clothes, or many other things that we don't realize come from agriculture. So next time you see a farmworker or an agricultural employer thank them and tell them how much you appreciate them for the hard work they do. It will brighten their day!