



PHOTOS BY ROB VARELA/THE STAR

Joshua Lomeli shows Alondra Serna his cards as he takes part in an Apples to Apples game with other youths at the One Step after-school program for teens that meets at First Methodist Church in Fillmore. Serna is the new program coordinator for House Farm Workers, which oversees the program and promotes housing for farmworker families.

# Planting roots



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■ Advocates seek affordable housing for migrant farmers

By **Stephanie Snyder**

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**A**s a Moorpark native, Alondra Serna, 28, grew up with an understanding of the influence of agriculture on Ventura County.

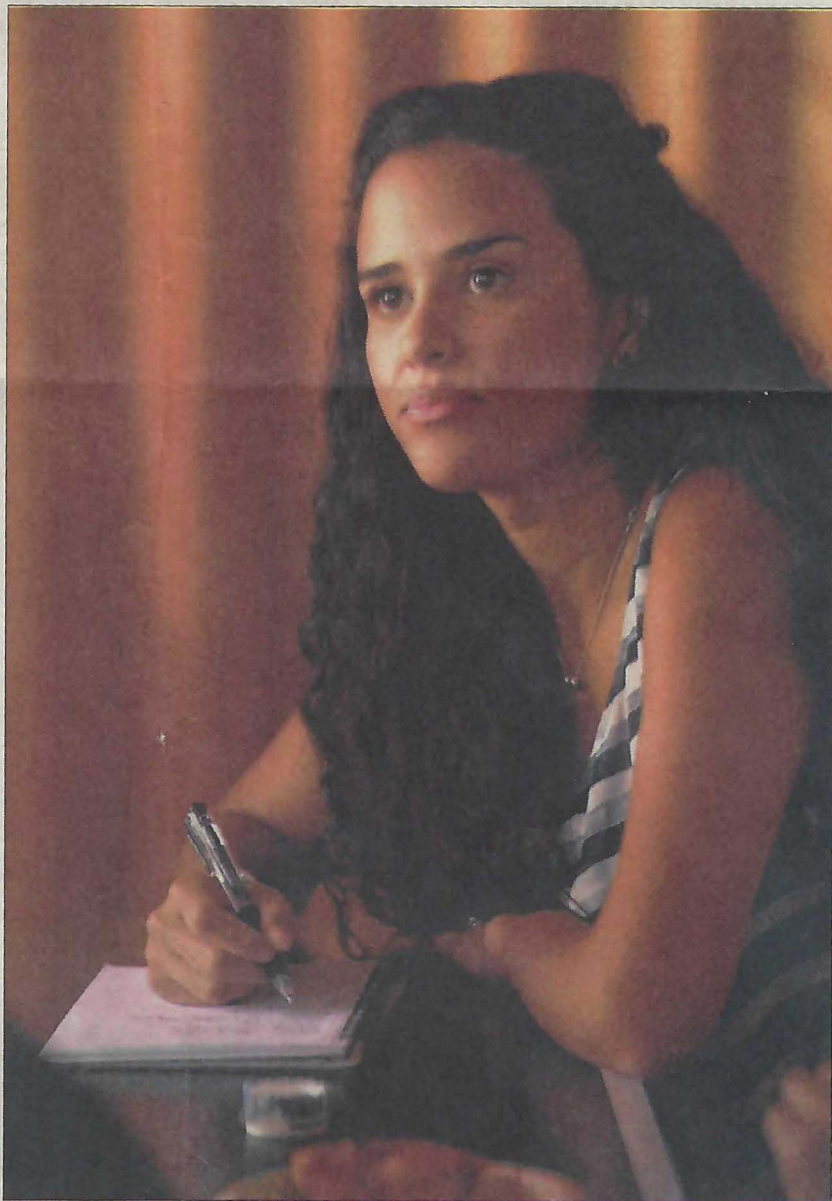
And after working with religious refugees in Los Angeles and the United Farm Workers labor union in Salinas, Serna decided to return to Ventura County to ensure the community has the same awareness of the needs of farmworkers as it does the economic benefits of agriculture.

Serna, the new coordinator for Santa Paula-based House Farm Workers, will work to further the advocacy program's 10-year initiative to promote affordable and safe housing for local farmworker families.

"Agriculture makes up a huge part of the identity of this county, and it's such a beautiful place to live, but I don't think many of us every day necessarily think about the farmworkers," she said.

Serna said her passion for migrants' and farmworkers' rights stems from her personal connections. Her grandfather came to California from Mexico as a fieldworker during the Bracero Program, and her father briefly worked in local packinghouses.

House Farm Workers, sponsored by the nonprofit Ag Innovations Network, has advocated



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# FARM WORKERS

from 1A

over the past decade for the development of nearly 380 affordable housing units created for farmworkers and their families, with an additional 160 units that are either approved, in the planning stage or will be completed within the year in Ventura County.

"To see growers and farmworkers and other like-minded people, regardless of political affiliations or religious affiliations, coming to the table and talking about the issues — it's phenomenal to see that. It's rare," Serna said. "That collaborative environment is what drew me."

A permanent funding pool of \$100,000 was established in May to help build affordable multifamily housing for local farmworkers, but the Ventura County Housing Trust Fund has not yet received a loan application for a development project with units dedicated to farmworkers.

The Housing Trust Fund is issuing a notice of funding availability for \$900,000 during the first week of September with the hope that an application will be received for a farmworker housing project, CEO Linda Braunschweiger said.

"We would very much like to see a farmworker project come in," she said.

The Housing Trust makes one or two funding availability announcements per year for short-term loans used for predevelopment funds. The Housing Trust would give priority funding to developers proposing farmworker units so the \$100,000 farmworker housing pool could be used to fund the \$900,000 loan, Braunschweiger said.

There are six city committees within House Farm Workers, including Oxnard, Ventura, Fillmore, Santa Paula, Camarillo and Moorpark, that advocate on behalf of farmworker communities by testifying at City Council meetings and educating members of the public on farmworker issues.

Each city committee has a core volunteer group of 10 to 15 people, said Serna, who is the only paid



ROB VARELA/THE

Alondra Serna (center), the new program coordinator for House Farm Workers, shares her background as she meets with Ma Richard (left), his sister Karla and other young people in the One Step after-school program. House Farm Workers hopes to benefit from a \$100,000 housing pool and \$900,000 in available funding for loans to provide affordable housing for migrants.

employee of House Farm Workers.

Susan Johnson, chairwoman of the Fillmore committee and the county's former chief deputy agricultural commissioner, said House Farm Workers has been "wildly successful" for an organization that is almost entirely voluntary.

"If the need were not so hideous and what we were able to do was not just a drop in the bucket, we'd be even happier," she said.

Johnson, who has worked with House Farm Workers since its inception in 2004, said the Fillmore committee started with a group of farmworkers advocating for a housing project that included 29 farmworker units and was eventually completed in 2010.

Another farmworker housing development with 66 units was completed in 2012 in Piru.

"It's just essential that those

people are housed," Johnson said. "House prices are outrageous because it's beautiful ... It's the closest definition of living in paradise as you can get."

Johnson, who worked for county and state agricultural departments for 33 years, said a farmworker housing summit is being planned in early 2015 — a little over 10 years since the first summit that launched House Farm Workers.

To continue making strides to provide more farmworker housing, Johnson said the summit will focus on engaging Ventura County's eastern cities that are less exposed to farmworkers, unlike the west county cities that "see people bending over in the fields."

"Thousand Oaks, Simi Valley, Newbury Park — that's where the money is, and that's where the votes are," she said. "Those

are the people we need to count on."

While Serna said she is amazed by what has been accomplished in the past decade, she's hoping to bring in the younger generation of farmworker advocates, especially the children of farmworkers who have possibly benefitted from affordable housing projects.

Serna said she is looking to strengthen the group's reach in the community through social media engagement, capturing and sharing the stories of farmworker families and partnering with local organizations that serve similar stakeholders.

"It's my belief that as a community we're here to serve one another," she said. "When I think of the work that farmworkers do every day serving us ... it's time that we served that community as well."