

Cultivating Safe Spaces: House Farm Workers! advocates for safe, decent and secure housing for ag employees.



By Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer

Ventura County is blessed with a tremendous agricultural bounty. The area's fields, ranches and farms cover thousands of acres, producing numerous fruits, vegetables, flowers and more. An industry that generates over \$1 billion in revenue a year, it is the lifeblood of the county and a major source of foodstuff for both the state and the nation.

Our agricultural legacy has deep roots with many branches. One of its most critical components is its farmworkers. There are around 42,000 men and women who till the soil, plant the fields, bring in the harvest and make the entire operation feasible. The agriculture industry rests on their shoulders – and yet they are among the lowest paid workers in the area, who struggle to afford the basics . . . including housing. Many end up living in overcrowded apartments, garages or even sheds.

House Farm Workers! hopes to change that. Founded in 2004, its mission is to promote safe, decent and secure housing for Ventura County farmworkers and their families, by working to put the right political, economic and regulatory building blocks in place. HFW! educates the public, elected officials and others about the need for quality, affordable



housing for farmworkers. Through the efforts of HFW! and its partners, over 1,000 homes have been completed or planned.

Ventana Monthly spoke with HFW! Executive Director Gabrielle Vignone, Board Chair Leslie Leavens and Communications Chair John Krist about the vital role that House Farm Workers! plays in the county, how it carries out its mission, the challenges ahead and more.

Ventana Monthly: Tell us a little bit about the history of House Farm Workers!

LESLIE LEAVENS: The seed of House Farm Workers! was planted 20 years ago when the Ag Futures Alliance, a group of divergent community members including farmers, farm labor advocates and environmentalists, who believed in a common vision of a vibrant agricultural industry in Ventura County, decided to look into the local issue of farmworker housing. After writing a “white paper” about the issue and pushing for a study of farmworker housing that was conducted by the county, they convened a summit in January 2004. More than 300 community members, city planning staff and local elected officials attended the all-day event. Many responded to a closing questionnaire saying they wanted to continue to be involved in ensuring farmworkers had access to safe, decent and affordable housing in their communities all over the county. And House Farm Workers! was born.

Meeting monthly at first, the then-named Farm Worker Housing Task Force consisted of about 20 folks who came from the affordable housing industry, farmworker advocates, the county and agriculture. Led by Ellen Brokaw, they exchanged information and advocated for farmworker housing.

By the time of the summit, there were already small committees in Santa Paula and Ventura meeting to advocate for farmworker housing. These groups came under the Farm Worker Housing Task Force umbrella, and additional committees were established in Oxnard, Camarillo, Fillmore and Moorpark. The organization attained its non-profit status in 2015 under the name House Farm Workers!

What is HFW!’s mission, and how does it accomplish that?

GABRIELLE VIGNONE: Our mission is to promote safe, decent, secure and affordable housing for Ventura County farmworkers and their families through education and advocacy. HFW! is accomplishing this goal with the use of city committee groups, voicing support for local affordable housing projects and currently for local housing elements.

A huge success for House Farm Workers! and Ventura County is the recent Somis Ranch Farmworker housing project. HFW! advocated for the Somis project; it will have a total of 360 farmworker units, making it the largest farmworker complex in the county. Education is provided through an immersion program in which students from CSUCI are immersed into a day in the life of a farmworker. The immersion includes students attending a day’s work at Reiter Affiliated Companies and viewing farmworker housing. HFW! has partnered with Cal State Channel Islands, Reiter Affiliated Companies and Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation to create this student experience.



Why is the work of HFW! important? What was the situation for farmworkers before HFW came on the scene?

JOHN KRIST: Farmworkers in Ventura County have long lived in overcrowded, substandard conditions. Before our organization was founded, however, there was no coordinated, effective and consistent countywide voice urging local officials to approve such projects. Approval of projects such as Somis Ranch highlight the importance of what HFW! does.

House Farm Workers! recently received a grant from the Southern California Association of Governments to work with other organizations and the county of Ventura to conduct a farmworker housing needs assessment. The results of that study will be used as leverage to push for the creation of even more affordable farmworker housing.

What is farmworker housing typically like? what kinds of things need to be improved?

KRIST: There is not really a “typical” type of farm worker housing. It ranges from single-family homes to apartments, dormitory-type housing for temporary guest workers, and even motel rooms. Too often, however, it may be a converted garage or a small apartment shared by multiple families. The reality is that these are fairly low-paid workers trying to find shelter in a vastly overpriced housing market.

Why, in your opinion, is it so hard to provide safe, decent, affordable housing for farmworkers?

KRIST: A lot of it is simple economics. Not much housing of any kind gets built in Ventura County — which is one of the reasons it is so expensive to live here — and as a result developers prefer to build market-rate housing, not units affordable to low-income families. Some of it is also political. It is common for neighbors to object loudly to local government whenever an affordable housing project is proposed for their area.

How many people are a part of HFW!?

VIGNONE: House Farm Workers! currently has two employees and 11 volunteer board members. Farmworkers have attended city committee meetings, and we plan to create a farmworker committee in 2022.

Let’s talk a little bit about the Ellen Brokaw HFW! Scholarship. When was it founded and how many students have been recipients?

KRIST: The Ellen Brokaw scholarship is named after the founding chair of House Farm Workers! Ellen is a prominent member of Ventura County’s agricultural community, and has long been an energetic and ardent proponent for farmworker families — including household financial support, better housing and improved educational opportunities. Since 2016, 19 students have received the scholarship named in her honor, which is currently \$3,000.



What are some of the biggest challenges HFW! faces in trying to advocate for more and better housing?

KRIST: There are powerful economic forces that make it very difficult for developers to design affordable housing projects that pencil out financially. Funding is difficult to obtain, and city and county approval processes are difficult and expensive to navigate. There's also the political pushback from residents who just don't regard low-income families as desirable neighbors.

What impact did the pandemic have on farmworkers, and on HFW!'s work?

KRIST: As essential workers, agricultural employees were allowed to continue working even after the pandemic shutdown began. But the closures shuttered restaurants, hotels and many other sectors of the economy. Overnight, the food service industry collapsed, meaning an important market for Ventura County crops disappeared. Fields were plowed under, and as a result, many workers were furloughed or saw their hours cut back.

In response, House Farm Workers! board member Ellen Brokaw quickly organized a fundraising effort, led by local agricultural employers, to provide household financial assistance to farmworker families. Initially, thanks to matching funds from the county of Ventura, the effort raised more than \$400,000. The county followed up by partnering with the Ventura County Community Foundation to distribute another \$3.65 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds through the program.

What remain the greatest needs for your organization?

KRIST: As an organization, we are always seeking community partners to keep the housing needs of our essential agricultural workers at the top of the agenda in every city and at the county whenever land-use policies are being developed and land-use decisions are being made.

What do you see for farmworkers and HFW!, moving forward?

KRIST: Our realistic goals moving forward are for farmworker housing to be addressed in the Housing Elements of all the city and county General Plans. The elements are currently under development. We also will be working on the farmworker housing needs assessment to make sure the community has accurate data and a solid understanding of what the farmworker population really needs from all of us.

VIGNONE: Our pie-in-the-sky dream goal would be that developers, farmers, farmworkers and non-ag community members will gather and rally to address the current housing need, and that their voices will cause an unstoppable development of farmworker housing countywide. In that vision, developers will fight over who gets to build the next farmworker housing project and they will all win and simultaneously build and build and build!

Anything else you'd like to share about HFW!?

VIGNONE: House Farm Workers! is possible because of collaborations and donations. For more information on how to do either, please visit our website. You can sign up to join a local city group, receive our newsletter or make a donation.

