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# 'I know I can't bring my family here'

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Tony had never heard of Alberta when he applied to pick vegetables on a farm there in the summer.

He knew the job was in Canada and that it paid \$8 an hour. That was good enough for him and 300 other Hondurans vying for 20 jobs.

The 29-year-old passed the medical, aced the math exam and made short work of the strength test – lifting a sack of cow feed five times.



Tony, 29, from Honduras, now works illegally in Toronto. He "escaped" an Alberta farm where he spent 12 hours a day on his knees picking green onions. VINCE TALOTTA/TORONTO STAR

The International Organization for Migration, made up of 127 member states, including Canada, conducted the recruitment process and charged Tony about \$400.

Within six months of applying, Tony and the others were on planes to El Salvador, then Toronto, and on to Calgary, before hopping on a bus to the farm.

In Danli, the southern Honduran town known for its cigars, he left a job delivering cooking gas canisters that paid \$300 a month. He also left his partner and three children, the oldest 9, whom he planned to support with remittances. It didn't turn out that way.

"What they explained to us was so different from the reality we found," Tony says through a translator.

He says the first thing farm managers did when he arrived on July 27 was take his passport. Then they charged him rent for all of July. He paid \$240 a month to live with 16 other workers in a house. Four people slept on bunk beds in his room. He says he even had to pay \$45 for sheets, blankets and pillows. All of it was deducted from his paycheque.

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Instead of hourly wages, he was paid by the bushel-full of green onions he picked. He spent 12 hours a day on his knees. An old knee injury flared up, slowing him down. He barely managed to fill eight baskets – or \$24 worth – a day.

"You pay your rent, plus you have to pay for your food," he says. "It wasn't worth it. I didn't have any money to send back home."

He asked to be assigned work that didn't keep him on his knees, but says he was refused. He claims farm managers also refused to take him for medical care when he came down with a throat infection. He called members of a local church, and they took him instead.

About six weeks into his job, Tony and two other Honduran workers "escaped," as he puts it. To avoid attracting attention, they walked to a bus stop without suitcases, leaving most of their belongings behind. They also left without their passports, which Tony says farm managers kept from the first day.

They rode to Calgary. One of the Hondurans knew someone in Toronto, so they hopped a bus and headed east. They travelled for three days and two nights. Tony had little money and not much to eat. So he slept.

"When you sleep you don't feel hungry," he says during an interview in a coffee shop in the Weston neighbourhood.

The Toronto acquaintance gave them a place to stay. Almost immediately, through simple word of mouth in the Latin American community, they landed jobs cleaning schools at night for \$9 an hour. After 10 days, Tony switched to a job with a contractor who renovates houses. It paid him \$1 an hour more, but the work has been on and off, and Tony is looking for something steadier.

His work permit runs out at the end of the year, but Tony has already violated its conditions by leaving the Alberta farm and working for another employer without federal approval. Complicating matters is the fact he doesn't have his passport. In any event, he has no intention of leaving Canada.

"I'm scared," Tony says, when asked about facing a life living underground.

"I know I can't bring my family here," he adds. "The more important thing is that I send them money. And if they manage to have what I never had, then I'm happy."

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