

## Rural Opportunities Incorporated

As we pulled up to "The Field of Dreams", the Adams County office Rural Opportunities Incorporated, the stone on the outside of the building still gleamed with a hint of newness. Stepping through the front door, an odor of cleaning supplies mixed with the scent of baby powder wafted by my nose. The chatter of little children happily playing in the back of the building reached my ears. We were greeted by a young woman dressed in a business suit who appeared to not be all that happy about or interested in the idea of giving us a tour of the facility. Our little group shuffled in and out of various parts of the building while cold statistics about Rural Opportunities assistance to the local farm worker population were quoted.

While floundering around for an idea for a project topic, Professor Bloom suggested that I work on researching the history and facts behind Rural Opportunities, since no one else in the class was working on such a project. He clued me into the fact that the Rural Opportunities office in Adams County is part of a much larger organization. Happy to have finally found a solid topic, I went home and began eagerly researching Rural Opportunities on the Internet. I saw an organization with a rich history, staffed at the administrative level by dedicated people with the best of intentions, striving to help farm workers improve their lifestyles. Based on what I read on the Internet, the services offered by ROI were embraced with open arms in other communities and were resulting in many lives changed for the better.

From the ROI home page I acquired the e-mail address of Stuart Mitchell, the President and CEO of Rural Opportunities Incorporated. I e-mailed him with crossed fingers that such a busy man might be able to find a few moments to talk to me. To my amazement, he replied to my e-mail the next day offering anything he could do to help including an interview. Mr. Mitchell and I found a time that was convenient for both of us and sat down for what fumed into a rather lengthy and valuable discussion about the birth of ROI and the principals the organization is found upon and for. As Mr. Mitchell explained the ins and outs of Rural Opportunities to me, I began to discover the principles that ROI was founded upon. I feel that, due to the poor introduction to the Rural Opportunities organization that the Adams County center provided us with, I as well as my classmates made an unfair and inaccurate judgment of the Rural Opportunities program as a whole.

As Stuart Mitchell, the President and CEO of Rural Opportunities Incorporated, and I talked, he relayed to me his vivid memories of the turbulent years during the Civil Rights Movement. In 1965 Mr. Mitchell was in his junior year at Cornell University. During that time, in a little rural area of Fayette County, Tennessee, share croppers had organized in an effort to try and register as many share croppers as possible. As a result, the share croppers ended up losing their farms and their homes and were living in a tent city that they had created. Mr. Mitchell, along with some of his fellow students and a few of the professors at the University, organized a project to go to Tennessee and work as civil rights workers, lending a hand to the share croppers. Mr. Mitchell spent the summer in Tennessee assisting the share croppers and working to integrate racially segregated facilities. Up until that point, Mr. Mitchell had expected to return to the life on a dairy farm that he had always know, but after, "the experience of understanding for the first time

issues related to poverty, to racism, the effects of what segregation does to people," he decided to change his goals for life. After graduation from Cornell, Mr. Mitchell attended Colgate Rogers Divinity School, the local divinity school in Rochester, New York.

During the 1960's in New York state, there were Migrant Ministry programs which were sponsored by either a local church, or more likely, sponsored by groups of churches in a geographic area. The mission of these Migrant Ministry programs was to provide services to migrant workers who were in the area to do farm work. In New York state, these Migrant Ministries were organized into a statewide coalition of church ministry and outreach ministry groups and sponsored by the New York State Council of Churches. The churches provided the Migrant Ministry committees with assistance in managing finances, technical assistance, as well as by offering conferences. In the Up-State New York area there were four Migrant Ministry groups who began talking and working with each other in 1964 and 1965 when they heard that some federal funding was going to be available to their group of humanitarian organizations. These four Migrant Ministries, with the help of Dr. Gloria Matera and a few of her colleagues from Genesee State College, individuals from church based groups, growers, and individuals from state agencies such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, got together to develop ways to acquire federal money to provide services to migrant farm workers. It was this group of agencies that Mr. Mitchell had a summer job with after his first year at the divinity school. While working there he was an advocate and outreach worker for farm workers, helping to provide them with various kinds of emergency assistance. Rural Opportunities was born when this diverse group of people applied for and received the available funds from the Office of Economic Opportunity. Thirty years ago this grant and a small group of people provided the basis for what is known today as Rural Opportunities, Incorporated, a now successful non-profit organization whose mission statement reads as follows:

Rural Opportunities, Incorporated creates and provides opportunities for farm workers and other disenfranchised people to confront and overcome barriers that systematically prevent them from gaining access to economic, educational, social, and political resources. We advocate for empowerment of and social justice for low-income individuals, families; and promote responsible development of communities in which they live. We develop and operate programs, with guidance from low-income individuals and communities, that create positive change for those we serve. The foundation of our organization's comprehensive delivery system is a diverse, committed and skilled farm workers governed Board of Directors and staff.

Over the past thirty years Rural Opportunities has grown in leaps and bounds, adding five states, not including New York, to its area of operation. Those five states are Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Michigan, and Indiana. Rural Opportunities, like most large organizations, has a very structured administrative set-up. This administration is made up of the President and CEO, the finance division, the planning and research division, and the human resource division, as well as the Board of Directors (<http://www.ruralinc.org>).

The position of President and CEO of Rural Opportunities, Incorporated is held by Stuart Mitchell, who has been in the leadership role at ROI from the beginning. Mr. Mitchell has received recognition for his leadership of ROI and advocacy work in general. He is currently in the leadership role of a national partnership between the US Department of Labor and its

grantees. He is also the President of the National Committee for Farm workers as well as a member of the Housing Advisory Council of Fannie Mae, a financial organization that creates affordable housing throughout the country. In addition, last year he was recognized for his thirty years of devoted service to ROI (<http://www.ruralinc.org>). As the CEO of ROI, he is the one to whom heads of each division report. In general, he is the person who is looked to for the leadership of the organization, in cooperation with the Board of Directors. Mr. Mitchell, on the other hand, is hired and fired by the Board of Directors. He feels as though it is his responsibility to, "make sure that the board can do it's job. I have to be sure to be in good communication with the Board Chair and officers of the corporation and I need to exceed their expectations as an administrator." Mr. Mitchell considers the second part of his responsibilities to be administrating and managing the interior workings of the organization. In addition, he is also the representative of Rural Opportunities as a whole, appearing for public speaking engagements, doing interviews and fund-raisers, writing for the organization's news letter, as well as doing a lot of public relations work.

The finance division of ROI is responsible for the organization's financial side, including the payroll, accounts payable, audits, and reporting funding sources. The planning and research division keeps track of all of the program services provided by ROI as well as the data on participants ([www.ruralinc.org](http://www.ruralinc.org)). The human resource division is responsible for taking care of the 187 full time employees and 225 part time employees that ROI has on staff. ROI's Board of Directors, the majority of which is made up of farm workers, is the policy studies and decision making branch of the organization (<http://www.ruralinc.org>). Each county where there is a Rural Opportunities program has a farm worker representative on the Board. Each Board member brings the concerns of farm workers in their area to the meetings which are held periodically in Rochester, New York.

As a non-profit organization, Rural Opportunities relies on grants and other government funding as well as donations and contributions to pay for services the organization provides. In the early years, the funding provided to ROI by the Office Economic Opportunities was very involved and complicated to receive. It read writing extensive and detailed proposals which described the services you were going to provide. However, once the grants were received there was not a heavy emphasis on accountability for what the money was being spent on. This flexibility allowed ROI to do a lot of things for farm workers which they can no longer do. Over the years this has changed, and accountability for how resources are spent has become of much importance. Mr. Mitchell feels that, " it has been positive to be driven towards more accountability, more overall respect for the resources. I think it's good that we're held to specific goals and objectives...those are quantifiable...we can track them and so forth. I think that the whole idea of being accountable for the dollars and the way in which they are spent cornered people strictly to the budget sources of the public. I think that there is nothing wrong with this, but some of the restrictions on what we can do with the money and what we can't do...that has definitely hurt our ability to reach out to people."

During the 1997 year, ROI received \$10,985,336 in funding from federal grants, as well as an additional \$2,956,645 in funding from local governments (ROI 1997-98 Annual Report). Continually, the biggest contributor to ROI's efforts is the US Department of Labor who provides the funds and supportive assistance to help train people who are interested in turning seasonal

employment into full time, year round employment. Some of these grants are fixed from year to year, but ROI is required to compete for the bigger grants every two years.

Rural Opportunities, Incorporated offers a plethora of services, spanning every need that a farm worker could encounter. There are six main programs made available to migrant workers by Rural Opportunities. These programs are: Adult Training and Employment, Housing Development and Property Managing Services, Migrant Head Start, Health and Safety Programs, Emergency Support, and Public Policy and Advocacy.

One of the most important goals of Rural Opportunities is to help migrant farm workers find year round employment and leave behind the migrant lifestyle which is common among farm workers. The program which is responsible for helping farm workers make this transition into a year round job is the Adult Training and Employment Program. There are a wealth of training and employment options offered to workers that come seeking assistance, so as to give each individual an opportunity to learn a skill which interests them as well as a skill that will help them be successful in the competitive job market (<http://www.ruralinc.org>).

An individual who seeks assistance from ROI's Training and Employment Program goes through four steps. First, it is determined whether or not the individual is eligible. If so, they go through a "vocational and educational assessment" which is used to determine a development plan for the person and their family (<http://www.ruralinc.org>). The actual job training is the next part of the process. Finally, ROI helps the newly trained individual with long term employment. During the 1997-1998 year, the average individual who came to ROI seeking job training and employment averaged a yearly income of \$5,289. After receiving training and placement in a job the average yearly income of these individuals nearly tripled, reaching \$ 14,851 (ROI 1997-1998 Annual Report).

Rural Opportunities offers a wealth of programs dealing with housing. They provide migrant laborers with the various opportunities, from the ability to rent an apartment to the chance to own their own home. The majority of these projects are funded by the US Departments of Labor and Agriculture.

The purpose of Rural Opportunities Housing Development Program is to help low-income families to become home owners. Mr. Mitchell recognized this program as one of the most instrumental programs ROI has to offer saying, " Housing...you can't have a decent job if you don't have a place to live." The Home Ownership Program helps these families overcome obstacles that prevent them from owning a home such as no credit history and or past credit problems as well as lack of savings for a down-payment. One of the first services that are offered to an individual or family that comes to ROI seeking help in owning their own home is a "home-buyer education" session. During these sessions, how to create a budget, issues having to do with credit, how to buy a home, as well as home maintenance are discussed. Families who have gone through these sessions may be able to receive help financially when they go to buy their home. They have the opportunity to have their personal savings matched by money from other funds such as grants or loans. This money can be put toward down payments or closing costs on the home they wish to purchase (<http://www.ruralinc.org>).

There is also assistance available for those individuals who do not desire to or are not able to own their own home. These programs make housing more affordable through financial assistance. One such option is the Affordable Housing Program. This program develops as well as constructs and renovates single family homes and apartments. Through this program farm workers, homeless single parents, rural families, and disabled individuals can obtain decent, clean, and affordable housing. Through this program ROI pays a portion of families' rents to landlords that agree to participate in the program.

The Migrant Head Start Program provides care for the children of farm workers in the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The program is funded through the East Coast Migrant Head Start Program (<http://www.ruralinc.org>). Children ages birth through five years are able to participate. In 1997, 258 children in New Jersey and 143 children in Pennsylvania participated in the program. As of 1997, twenty percent of the children that participated in the Head Start program had been taking advantage of the program for four to five years (1997-98 ROI Annual Report).

Head Start provides activities for these children which aid in their cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development (<http://ruralinc.org>). The work day of a farm worker is often long, at times from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night, meaning that a farm worker's children could end up spending a considerable amount of time at the Migrant Head Start center. As a result of this, the program strives to include and involve the parents of the children it provides care for.

Rural Opportunities Health and Safety Programs provide education to farm workers in areas involving their health through instructional and informative sessions. Through these programs, ROI hopes to lessen the occurrence of unnecessary illness and injury. Rural Opportunities Health and Safety Programs include: child abuse prevention, HIV and AIDS education, nutrition education programs, domestic violence and rape prevention, and high-risk-pregnancy outreach and support services. As explained by Mr. Mitchell, "We have a host of supportive services contracts out there....AIDS education to pesticide education and awareness of the dangers of pesticides and dangers of unprotected sex, falls related to back injury...all kinds of things to help safety first. We are trying to provide resources to help that happen. Helpful kinds of seminars...most of them are usually seminars or smaller groups, usually at night, to have help available when the workers are available."

The most key portion of the Migrant Health and Safety Programs is the Migrant Occupational Safety Training. This program is funded by the US Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Training and Education Program and exists to inform and educate farm workers and their families about pesticide safety, hearing loss prevention, and back care. The services are provided free of charge in workshop format by AmeriCorps Members or volunteers in the native language of the farm workers. The workshops and seminars are scheduled around the long work days of the farm workers, usually in the early evening when the farm workers arrive home from the fields (<http://www.ruralinc.org>).

The Emergency and Supportive Services available through Rural Opportunities exist to help find and execute solutions to emergencies that may arise in the lives of individuals and families. ROI provides those in need of support during the transition from unemployment to a stable job by

providing rent payments, transportation, food, and clothing. There is also shelter available for the homeless. Translation services are available for those who do not speak English. When people come to ROI in search of emergency assistance, they are also referred to other community resources that may have something to offer (<http://www.ruralinc.org>).

Due to the fact that ROI receives a large portion of its funding through grants which are given to be put toward specific things, it has become harder over the past years for ROI to do as much emergency relief assistance as the organization used to do. The little funding that is provided to go toward emergency relief is not as flexible as it used to be. As Mr. Mitchell explained to me, "We can still do it (emergency relief), but we can't do it, generally, with as much flexibility as we could do. We were able to do more service for people...helping them day to day with, say, transportation, helping people get from one place to another. Getting them to the doctor, providing social services resources to people. Now most of our contracts that we have with the government require very rigid accountability for what you do with your time, and people don't pay us to provide emergency assistance and social work services for clients. We're responsible for meeting terms of contracts...."

Rural Opportunities Public Policy and Advocacy program has also been hard hit by the changes in the flexibility of funding. According to Mr. Mitchell, not being able to do as much advocacy work as the organization did in the beginning is, "one of the changes (in the organization)...not being able to do as much advocacy as we used to be able to do." Overall, Mr. Mitchell finds this to be, in general, a disappointing change, but understands and respects the need for funds to be controlled more tightly, and as a result becoming less flexible.

Rural Opportunities does as much advocacy work as available funds will allow. Advocacy work focuses on farm workers inclusion in as well as participation in coalitions and boards working towards better overall living conditions for farm laborers (<http://www.ruralinc.org>). At present, issues relating to field sanitation, wages, and farm worker rights to take part in collective bargaining are being addressed. Mr. Mitchell commented on laws that exclude or treat farm workers as if they are second class citizens saying that, "Agriculture will not survive without farm workers. They need to protect this asset. Basic labor standards are the cornerstone of a solid, productive labor force. Any law that excludes farm workers from the rights afforded all other workers is discriminatory (Building Blocks)." On May 6 of 1997 over 500 farm workers and advocates, including ROI staff and individuals participating in ROI's programs, from New York state area rallied in Albany, NY. For the third year, this group of people gathered to remind others of the unfair laws imposed on farm workers in New York state and to support farm worker-related legislation pending at the New York State Legislature (1997-98 ROI Annual Report). As a result of this rally the NY State Legislature passed a bill granting farm workers access to clean drinking water in the fields.

The programs offered by Rural Opportunities have a wealth of support to provide, but are not available to just any one. Mr. Mitchell gave a very basic explanation of the criteria that an individual or family must meet in order to be eligible for the programs that ROI has to offer saying that, "Well, in general, they have to be poor, have low income or no income, and have some need they want to have fulfilled. Each of the funding sources has different criteria, but the common thread through all of them is that you have to be poor, you have to have a need for our

programs, especially the services for employment training. You have to have done farm work...some substantial amount of time over the past two years."

In order to determine if an individual is eligible for ROI's programs, there are four initial criteria that must be met. First, the individual must be a seasonal farm worker or migrant farm worker. To qualify, the individual must have received at least fifty percent of their total earned income or been employed at least fifty percent of their total work time in farm work. Secondly, the individual must meet the or fall below the income criteria. Next, the individual must meet work authorization guidelines. To meet these guidelines an individual must be: "A citizen or national of the United States, lawfully admitted permanent resident alien, or lawfully admitted refugee or parole, or other individual authorized by the Attorney General to work in the United States. ( US Dept. of Labor)." In addition to the above requirements, most males seeking to participate in ROI's programs must be registered for the selective service. One of the biggest problems and frustrations encountered by the Rural Opportunities organization as a whole when attempting to provide services to farm workers is related to these eligibility criteria. The federal agencies that support ROI's efforts make it mandatory that the organization provide it's services only to documented individuals. Mr. Mitchell commented that, "there is a huge shift, a change in the issue of people being undocumented, and the federal and state funds that we receive require that we serve only documented, employable migrants, or workers. That means that some places we could turn away seventy percent of the people who are up here looking for work and in need of assistance, and that hurts. Not being able to serve everybody who walks in the door, or not being given a shot to serve everybody who walks in the door." Organizations such as ROI have been backed into a corner by the government when it comes to assisting undocumented workers through legislature such as the Rodino Bill, effective in June of 1972. This bill states that: "Any employer who knowingly employs any >alien= who has not been lawfully admitted in the United States shall be subject to a citation and fine imposed by the Attorney General.... " (file #3). As a result, organizations such as ROI, fearing the legal ramifications of helping undocumented individuals, are unable to help all of those that they would otherwise wish to.

As much as the organization wants to be able to help these undocumented individuals, they cannot, for fear of the penalties that could be placed on their organization for providing assistance to these people. ROI must provide to the government a budget of the services they provide. If they are found to have assisted an undocumented individual, they could be forced to pay back the money that was used toward helping this individual. The worst case scenario is that ROI could lose all of it's government funding as a penalty for not being able to keep track of what funds are spent on. In order to safeguard against facing any of these penalties, Mr. Mitchell said that the issue of documentation, "is a very serious issue and we watch it very carefully, and it's something that our staff has to be prepared and cautious in how we do enrollments, what we do, and who we allow our service to ... who we involve."

Like any stable organization with hopes for a bright and productive future, the employees of Rural Opportunities are looking toward the years to come with many goals, hopes, and dreams. Mr. Mitchell feels that, "We [ROI] are really at a good place. I think we've got a good program mix...strong... whatever it takes to help people move from seasonal jobs to full time jobs, whatever it takes to put together affordable housing." However, he realizes that there are improvements to be made and goals to be reached in the future. One of his main goals for the

future is to peruse the opportunity and ability to do more work in the area of advocacy for farm worker legislation on both the state and federal levels of government. A second goal for the organization is to work with the Board of Directors, making every effort to build a better functioning, stronger core group of people. The fact that the board is made up of half farm workers and half executives can make things tricky at times. The ROI Board of Directors is, in an essence, two very different groups of people trying to learn to understand each other while working toward a common goal. Commenting on the Board of Directors Mr. Mitchell stated, AThe Board of Directors is an area that we are having to work very hard at, having to pitch in and build the board as strong as possible. It's a continual effort to bring down the wall....to educate them into the work that we do and to figure out ways that they can help to provide leadership. That's not an easy thing to do.@ One of the major problems

faced by the board members is overcoming the language barrier. As the years have gone by, the make-up of the farm worker population has shifted from English speaking African Americans from Florida to Spanish speakers from Mexico and Latin American countries. Mr. Mitchell himself admits that he doesn't speak enough Spanish to communicate effectively with the Spanish speaking members speakers do not speak sufficient English to communicate with him. To combat this of the board and most of the Spanish

problem, instantaneous translation is provided at all of the board meetings. In addition, ROI is trying to look for board members on both sides that are bilingual.

As I feel is evident from the wealth of information provided to me by Mr. Mitchell, I found him to be extremely helpful. From the first moments of my conversation with him, I discovered Mr. Mitchell to be a man who is deeply passionate about the work he does, who cares for farm workers and understands their plight, and who has dedicated his life's work to bettering their living conditions. In my opinion, Mr. Mitchell embodies and exemplifies the spirit and mission of Rural Opportunities. In my opinion the dedication of Mr. Mitchell, as well as his colleagues, was magnified by the efforts that they put forth on my behalf, responding to my interest in their organization with offers of any help that they could be of to me.

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I also was lucky enough to have the chance to interview Oscar, Adam's County's farm worker representative to ROI's Board of Directors. I felt as though our talk made the employees of the office uncomfortable; one of them made it a point to spend the entire time Oscar and I were talking in the room across the hall from us as well as to stop in and check on us every once in a while. I felt uncomfortable, like he was listening to our conversation. However, Oscar didn't appear to care and spent the next two hours telling me his story (journal, 11 November, 1998).

Oscar is a prime example of the impact that Rural Opportunities has the ability to make on a the life of a person, He spoke with me candidly and openly about his life as well as his involvement with and opinions about ROI. Oscar came to the United States, Washington State to be exact, almost eleven years ago from Mexico City. He left behind six brothers and three sisters as well

as two ex-wives in Mexico. He worked in farm work in Washington while also leading what he described as a life filled with drugs, women, and alcohol. As a result of this lifestyle, Oscar ended up spending five years in jail where he read a great deal of books, studied for his GED, and took typing and ESL classes (journal, 11 November, 1998).

After he was released from jail he drove cross country to Pennsylvania where his third wife would eventually join him, to start life fresh and new. He switched jobs repeatedly after arriving in Pennsylvania. At one low point, when there was no job and no money, he came to ROI seeking assistance. ROI helped Oscar get a job at Knouse Foods and paid the rent on an apartment for him and his family until they got on their feet again (journal, 11 November, 1998).

At one point after this, Stuart Mitchell was visiting the Adams County ROI center and Oscar made it a point to meet him. While talking to Mr. Mitchell, Oscar mentioned some concerns about housing provided by growers in the area. Mr. Mitchell noticed Oscar's interests as well as his concern for his people and told Oscar that he'd like to see him run for the Board of Directors. At first Oscar hesitated, not wanting to be involved in anything having to do with politics. In the end he saw the chance to be on the board as an opportunity to help his people, and went to a meeting in Gettysburg where he was elected to the board. Ever since, Oscar has been attending the board meetings in Rochester, New York and serving as the voice for his fellow farm workers (journal, 11 November, 1998).

I feel that the administration of ROI had their heart and intentions in the right place, but that there has been a communication problem which has kept the ideals and goals of the administration from filtering down to the employees of the Adams County ROI. I feel lucky to have had the chance to discover more about ROI and the intentions and goals of the organization as a whole.

#### Works Cited

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