

Oral Memoirs
of
Geraldean Matthew

An Interview Conducted by

Jared Muha

October 30, 2014

Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories
(RICHERS) Program

University of Central Florida RICHES Program

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Jared Muha

Transcriber: Geoffrey Cravero

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES Program, History Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

The RICHES Program is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Jared Muha is an undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in History. His area of interest is agricultural labor. Geraldean Matthew is a third generation migrant farmworker and an advocate for environmental justice and migrant farmworkers' rights, working with the Florida Department of Health in Orange County, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the National Farmworkers Association (NFWA). Matthew became sick with a kidney disease caused by years of exposure to pesticides while working the fields around Lake Apopka and across the east coast of the United States.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Geraldean Matthew is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 30, 2014.

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Abstract

An oral history interview of Geraldean Matthew, a third-generation farmworker and advocate for environmental justice and migrant farmworkers' rights. The interview was conducted by Jared Muha in Apopka, Florida, on October 30, 2014. Some of the topics covered include a summary of Matthew's life, leaving home at age 13, her relationships with her mother and father, her slave heritage, her grandparents, segregation, traveling to the North, tramp trucks and maggot workers, life in labor camps, the replacement of African-American workers with Hispanic workers and the relationship between the two races, educational programs and retraining of the replaced workers, the effects of unemployment and underemployment on African-American families, working for environmental justice and farmworker's rights, her contribution to *Fed Up: The High Costs of Cheap Food*, a book about sexual misconduct by crew leaders, modern farms in Florida and the treatment of Hispanic workers today.

Geraldean Matthew

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Jared Muha
October 30, 2014
Apopka, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Muha This is Jared Muha. I'm here on October 30th[, 2014] with Geraldean Matthew. Um, Geraldean, to start off, can I ask you just to tell you – tell – tell me a little bit about yourself, um, and who you are?

Matthew Well, I'm Geraldean Matthew. I was Geraldean Shannon before I got married and became – became the – Matthew. Um, I come from Palm Beach County, a little place in the – on the, um, eastern shores of Palm – of Palm Beach. Um, I was a migrant farmworker. I'm the third generations[sic] of farmworkers – uh, of migrant workers in my family, and, um, we continued – I continued to do farm work until, um, 1972.

Um, I can remember as far as[sic] back when I was three years old, traveling to see them with my mom on what you call a "traffic truck" – a "tramp truck," and it's[sic] taken us from Belle Glade, Florida, to the New York states[sic] to pick apples and beans – whatever state we were in, whatever the vegetable was, and, um, in traveling back, we stopped in a little town called Mount Dora, and from Mount Dora to Apopka, and that's when we decided to stay here to work in the oranges, which was our first time ever picking oranges, and from there we ended up staying here in Apopka, and, um, I left home at the age of 13 and went out on my own and been out on my own ever since, and from there, I got married and I end[sic] up with six babies, uh – 12 years of marriage, and then I divorce[sic] and from there, I had to take care of my kids and raise my kids alone, and I continued to travel, and in 1972, that's when I gave it up. I didn't want to put my children through what I had went[sic] through – changing schools every two or three months because you've got to move to the next state to work.

So, um, we remaineded[sic] here in – in – in Apopka, Florida, and from that, I continued to work in the fields, um, cutting and jiving[?], packing corn, and picking string beans, and, uh, whatever else they had for us to do – working in the carrots, and, um, from there, I just got tired of the – the – the farm work...

Muha Hm.

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Matthew And I went into doing the foliage work, uh—potting flowers, and that—I liked it pretty good, and I stayed there for a number of years, and then from there, I volunteered to work with the Farmworker Association[of Florida] and I landed a job with the association, and I worked there doing different types of jobs in the organization, and, um, I started advocating for poor people[sic] rights in Tallahassee, and that was one of the most awesome jobs I had ever had in my life. Just having a—just a 10th grade education, it was really awesome, because I never thought in life that I would land such a good job, and from there, I started working, uh—after they laid me off ‘cause lack of, uh, grants, I start[sic] working with Orange County Health Department and then, uh, Env – En – Environmental Protection [Agency], and, uh, I worked there with David Overfield for a few months, and then I got sick with my kidney. Worked from December until April, and the kidney broke down and I had to stop working with them.

I, uh, left them in June, and from there I got sicker and sicker, and I ended up on kidney dialysis. So right now, that’s where I basically is[sic]. I’m on kidney dialysis three days a week. Um, I just was told a month ago that my liver is gone. My heart—there’s nothing they can do. So right now, I have my good days, I have my bad days, and I just, you know, I have to accept what life throws at me and depend on the grace of the Good Lord. So right now that’s where I am.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew Um, there’s a lot of times, if I’m able to go to the grocery stores, um, I always tell people, “My job is not finished,” because I stand in the grocery stores and I talk with peoples[sic] about the use of pesticide in the field. Those that are still out there working.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew I’ve talked with them.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And, um, let them know that it’s not finished, you know? You’re still being sprayed with the pesticide if you’re still in the fields.

0:04:47 **Parents and leaving home at age 13**

Muha Well, thank you for telling me all that.

Matthew Hm.

Muha So you mentioned a few things that I wanna ask about.

Matthew Mmhmm?

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- Muha** Some now and some later. The first thing—um, you said you were 13 years old when you went on your own?
- Matthew** Yes.
- Muha** So can you tell me like how that happened and— and what— what that was like being 13 and on your own?
- Matthew** Well, the reason I left home when I was 13— because of a step-father, and, um, he didn't treat my mom right, and I had a sister and a brother, at that time, and he didn't treat them right. He were[sic] more like afraid of me, 'cause I used to threaten him all the time about if he would hit me, what I would do to him. So I didn't have to worry about getting licks from him, but he would beat my sister and beat my brother so bad[sic], and my mom, she didn't— she wasn't a violent person and I just couldn't—I couldn't take it— seeing her not saying nothing at the way he was treating the family.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** So one day I just packed and I left, and, um, I was, you know—I was tall. I was always a tall girl. So I could pass off for 17 years old, 18 years old—and that's what I did.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** And, um, I got a man—uh, a man and his wife to say they was[sic] my mom and, um, take me to the courthouse, and I got married.
- Muha** Hm.
- Matthew** And when I got married, then I was, you know—it was better for me to be married. That way I could—continue to help my mom.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** And I didn't move from around my mom until after about four years and—I was married and I moved to another town.
- Muha** Okay.
- Matthew** But I would come see her every Saturday.
- Muha** Mmhmm, but you continued working at the fields?
- Matthew** Mmhmm, I continued to work in the fields.
- Muha** Mmhmm, you just did it on your own then?

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Matthew Yep, mmhmm.

Muha Okay.

Matthew It was—it was like—it was hard, but, you know, having somebody to help you, it wasn't so difficult, because my thing was I always wanted to give my mom—I always wanted to make sure that my mom had—and I was able to help my mom.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew So after the marriage was over with of 12 years, then I continued to work, but I was always able to go by my mom[sic] house and give my mom money to help her.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew Because my mom was a young lady when she got—she took sick. She was 36...

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew When she took sick.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew Mmhmm.

Muha So yeah, I wanted to ask about your parents too. I mean, um, so—so your parents were farmworkers, as well?

Matthew Yes, my mom and my father were farmworkers when they met. My mom was 13 years old and my daddy was 15 years old.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And, um, when my mom got pregnant with me at the age of 13 years old, my father got—was afraid, and my father, he was big for—big, big, big boy...

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And he ran off and lied and went into the military. So he was in the Air Force all his life.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew He made a career out of it, and in, um—in 1960, he come[sic] home and everybody was saying that I was his baby, and he took a look at me and said, "Oh, yeah, that is my baby."

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Muha [laughs].

Matthew And they said then he wanted to be a part of my life, but he went back into the Air Force, and then, when he come[sic] back home, that[sic] when he begin[sic] to fight my mom for, uh, a part of my life. So they took it to court and the court give[sic] him, um—I stayed six months with my mom in Belle Glade, and I stayed six months with my father in Miami, and my father was called by mistake to go back into the military, and that’s when his mama and his wife decided to send me home...

Muha Okay.

Matthew To my mom.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And I never communicated with him again. When I seen[sic] my father again, it was 1972.

Muha Hm.

Matthew He came here and visit[sic] me, and I haven’t seen him again since.

Muha Hm.

Matthew ‘Cause he, um—he went fishing in Miami and he never was found again.

0:09:04 **Grandparents**

Muha Mmhmm, okay. Do you remember any stories that your mother or father had told you about their days working on the farms?

Matthew Yeah, my mom used to, um, tell us about when they was[sic] children and the sh—her mom and her father was[sic] together, how they would go to work. Uh, they was[sic]—they was[sic], um, picking cotton, and how they would go to work and work days and—I mean hours and hours in the cotton fields.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew Um, she mostly talked about my grandmother, but—because my grandmother was a slave...

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And she talked about—we talked about a lot of slavery in that—in our house...

Muha Mmhmm.

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- Matthew** Because of my grandmother being a slave.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** Um, sh—I mean, it wasn't no[sic] [inaudible] generation. Slavery was right at our backdoor.
- Muha** Yeah.
- Matthew** And, um, that's mostly what she'd talk about. She never really just do a lot of talk[sic] about herself as a little girl, you know? Sometimes she would tell us stories about how the crew leaders would try to do little nasty things and stunts and things they would pull, you know—and how my grandmother would defend them and stuff.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** Yeah, and mostly talks about my grandmother and mostly talks about her father and mostly her grandfather. Her grandfather was—uh, mostly talk of the family was her [laughs] grandfather. They used to tell us stories about how funny he was and how, you know, he—he—after coming off the slave camps, he'd never taken crap off of anybody again and how mean he was, and mostly what they talk about—even 'til today, they talk about my great-granddaddy—how, you know—how raw[?] he got and, you know, just didn't want nothing[sic] wrong to go—nothing in the family to go wrong.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** All the way up until he passed away, but my family, they're originally from Georgia—Fort Valley [State University], Georgia, and I used to have to go there after—if my mama didn't feel like taking us up on[sic] to see her, she would take us to Georgia and leave me with my grandmother.
- Muha** Hm.
- Matthew** So I would stay, uh, the month of June, July, August, and come back when school start[sic] in September.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** We would go back to Belle Glade.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** But if we was[sic] traveling, we would go to school wherever we was[sic].

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0:11:32

Segregation and discrimination

Muha So, um, you mentioned that, uh, you would travel, you know, during cer – certain seasons to – to pick in other states.

Matthew Mmhmm.

Muha Um, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about that. How did – how did what you experienced in other states differ from Apopka?

Matthew It was much different from my home in Belle Glade.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew It was much...

Muha In Belle Glade? Right[?].

Matthew Different from Belle Glade, because Belle Glade was a very, very violent town. Very vi – violent, and those states was[sic] more calmer[sic]. You saw more respect. In Belle Glade, there was no respect at all.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew Because Belle Glade was build[sic] up on people of all nationalities. It wasn't just the people from Belle Glade. It was the people from all over the Caribbean Islands, and there was no respect. If you was[sic] a child in Belle Glade, you knew everything that an adult knew when you was[sic] six or seven years old.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And it wasn't nice. It wasn't nice at all. So when we'd travel to the other states, we see the childrens[sic] more respectable[sic], it make[sic] you feel a difference. You be[sic] like, *Wow, why I can't be like that child?* You know, and the schools was[sic] different, because Belle Glade schools, they wasn't[sic] segregated, and those schools up North, they were segregated. So you got a chance to go to school – go – go to a – a school – a minority[?] school, and it was a big difference. It was like – the first time you went, it was scary, scary, scary, and as you continue to go, then the children begin to talk with you and you begin to meet friends, but when you first go – first start, you are told, "Oh, you can't play with them little white children." You know, because that was the way the South was out here.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew We could not – we didn't play with the childrens[sic] across the track, you know? We stayed on our side of the track and the whites stayed on their side of the

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track. So we didn't know the feeling of being with, uh, the white childrens[sic]. We didn't know that feeling.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew So when I went up to travel up North, then we connected with that. That was – to us it was weird, you know, but then, as we traveled to a – we might be in say, New Jersey – the childrens[sic] are one way in New Jersey, and when we get up to maybe New York, the children are different wherever they are – different style[?]. We had – we had to adapt to that, but as we continued down through the years, then it became like nothing to us, you know?

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew It was, you know – we expecting[sic] it.

Muha Right.

Matthew And it was all good, but I can remember the bad times when we travel[sic] and we was[sic] told that – we would stop and we would buy gas, and then if you needed – if one of the children needed to use the restroom, we was[sic] told that we couldn't use the restroom, and by me coming from the Deep South down here – coming up here, we'd have thought it was better, but it was worse in North Carolina.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew You want to use the bathroom after you done purchased gas, they tell you to go out there in the cornfield.

Muha Wow.

Matthew And that wasn't – that wasn't right with us, you know?

Muha Yeah.

Matthew That wasn't right.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew And it – it finally growed[sic] on us, you know? It finally growed[sic] on us, but we, as childrens[sic] – being a migrant worker, you really enjoyed, because you'll come in – you'll see things that you probably wouldn't have never[sic] seen if you wasn't[sic] a migrant worker.

Muha Yeah.

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Matthew Yeah, because—like right now, you travel from Florida to Georgia, you don't see any mountains, and back in our days, there were mountains. By the time you get to Savannah, Georgia, you got mountains. North Carolina on up, but now, you don't see that like you did—did when I was a child.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And, um, childrens[sic]—childrens[sic] nowadays will never get the opportunity that we had and that make[sic] me appreciate my life ,because I got a chance to do something that children nowadays would never do. I got a chance to travel on the back of a truck full[?] the women and childrens[sic] going up north. That was awesome. I got a chance to stop - when they stopped the truck, we would stop in the mountains and we would go up in the mountains and we would cook our food, and water would be coming down the mountain and we would take baths in the water. Children would never see that now, but, you know, it made us feel good. It made us feel good, 'cause the adult[sic] used to get mad. We out there, the water running down the mountain streams...

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And we were washing our skin and they were arguing, because we were so happy, you know?

Muha [laughs].

Matthew We cooking our food and stuff and we so happy, and they would argue, because life was really hard for the adults that had childrens[sic].

Muha Yeah.

Matthew To be on the back of a tru—of a—a truck—they called them “tramp trucks,” 'cause that's what they called us—tramps. We was[sic] either tramps or we was[sic] either maggot workers. We wasn't[sic] called “migrants.” We was called “maggot worker.” “There go[sic] those maggot workers.”

Muha By who[sic]?

Matthew Hm?

Muha Who would—who would call you that?

Matthew The peoples[sic] in the town where we was[sic] going.

0:17:25

Labor camps

Matthew And then we would live on labor camps. Some of them would have bathrooms and some of them wouldn't, and we would have to go down to the river to

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drink – get our – get our drinking water. So find the river – once we locate the river, we come back – the children would locate the river. We’d come back and tell the adults that we located a river, and the adults would go down and would start getting water from the river. Bring them back to the camp in buckets, and when the city people learned that peoples[sic] the, uh – the, um – the migrant workers from Florida are here. Once the word get[sic] out, then there were some people from the city – like there was a company in Maryland, Merita Bread – they would bring us bread on the camps, and, um, there was another company that made coats – they would bring us winter coats on the camp.

Muha Hm.

Matthew They made sure that we had socks on – some of the camps. Some of the states we went in, they wouldn’t give you nothing[sic], but, um...

Muha And the crew leaders would provide these?

Matthew No.

Muha No? Okay.

Matthew These was[sic] peoples[sic] that hear that migrant workers was[sic] here working.

Muha Okay.

Matthew And they would do that in hopes of[sic] – when we would start working, we would come and spend our money to your...

Muha Oh.

Matthew Store or whatever.

Muha Yeah. I see.

Matthew Mmhmm.

Muha So I wanted to – to ask about the labor camps, uh – the quarters. Um, so yeah, I mean, what were the quarters like? Could you speak to what the quarters were like here in Florida that you observed?

Matthew Well, a quar – the places here in Florida was[sic] much better than the places – much better than some of the places traveling up north, because here, in Florida, you had the Florida Farmworkers Bureau here and they was[sic] on top of a lot of faulty living, but up north, they didn’t worry about you. They would – they would take you in the woods. They mostly built their camps in the wood[sic], but here, in Florida, there were eyes on you, you know? So you can’t get away

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with a lot of stuff that you can get away[sic] up north, 'cause I can recall, in 1970, traveling to Michigan to pick cherries and apples. I can recall, when we got there, we saying[sic], "We[sic] going to the camp." There was no camp. The guy had chicken coops – what you put the chickens in.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew And they was[sic] taking chickens out, and I say[sic], "What are they going to do with them? Why are they taking the chickens out?" And somebody whispered to me and say[sic], "That's where you guys gonna sleep." So they brought a carriage. they put all the chicken coops in a line side by side in a circle-like and they brought a carriage – they put a carriage on top, and you're – from here up is inside the coop and your feet hanging[sic] out, and that's where we slept.

Muha Wow.

Matthew And, um, finally, somebody came down and talked to the – talked to the owner of the property, and that's when he began to build, um, a shed – a thing – a little building where we could go inside. So we had to go inside, but everybody was in one – one thing, and you had to put a – just a little sheet between you and the next family.

Muha Yep.

Matthew And that's the way we slept that season.

Muha Hm.

Matthew In – in – in – in Michigan. I can recall, in Maryland, the crew leader had a horse stable, and, uh, it was a huge horse stable. I never seen[sic] one that big, and he parted off into rooms, and each family had their room, and that's where we slept, but the male child could not sleep with – in – with the females. It – like my brother.

Muha Right.

Matthew My brother had to go up in the loft.

Muha Right.

Matthew And, uh, where they have all the hay at, and the mens[sic] had to sleep up in the loft, and the women slept in the barn – what we called a barn.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew You know, it was a lot of [*laughs*] – a lot of crazy ways we had to sleep. I mean, it was miserable.

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Muha Yeah.

Matthew Miserable.

Muha Yeah, but you stayed in quarters in Florida, as well, did – did – right? Or no?

Matthew No...

Muha Only – only when you traveled?

Matthew I never stayed – let me see. I never – I stayed in a quarter when I come[sic] to Apopka. They called it “the Graveyard Quarters.”

Muha Okay.

Matthew And it housed migrant workers, but most of the people was[sic] – was like – had come here as a migrant worker and never left.

Muha Oh, okay.

Matthew Yeah, they come here as a migrant worker and they lived in “the Graveyard Quarters,” but they never left.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew They be – they just continued to stay there until they tore it down.

0:22:31

Hispanic replacements for African American workers

Muha Okay, and – and who were they? Were they generally black Americans living there?

Matthew Black Americans.

Muha Okay.

Matthew Mmhmm. At that time, there wasn't[sic] no[sic] Hispanic farmworkers here. When I come[sic] to Apopka, it[sic] wasn't[sic] any Hispanic farmworkers here. It was all African Americans, and, um, when it got really throwed[?] was in 1990- something that they faded out African Americans. They got rid of them. Um, I'm trying to think, and when they – well, before they closed the farmland down, they give[sic] us all our papers and told us that they would not need us anymore, but those that want to come out there and help clean up can come clean up. They, um – all of the black crew leaders – they laid them off, and they hired a Hispanic man from Pahokee, and he brought some peoples[sic] up here and he re – they replaced us. We demonstrated and demonstrated about it, but nothing never[sic] happened.

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- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** When we would go out there and try to get work, they wouldn't give us no[sic] work.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** And it's still like that today. Once they replace[sic] us with Mexican workers, the Mexicans would not hire us. The crew leaders would not hire us, but we get a job, we'll hire them, but they will not hire us. It's still that way today.
- Muha** Great, so yeah—so, if I understand, uh, correctly, you said at some point in the 1990s, they fired most all the black...
- Matthew** They got rid of all the black...
- Muha** And that's up in Apopka?
- Matthew** In Apopka.
- Muha** Okay.
- Matthew** Mmhmm.
- Muha** And they replaced them with mainly...
- Matthew** Hispanics.
- Muha** Mexican or Hispanic crew leaders.
- Matthew** Mmhmm, right.
- Muha** And those crew leaders hired...
- Matthew** Hired...
- Muha** Predominantly...
- Matthew** Nothing but Mexicans.
- Muha** Really? Okay.
- Matthew** Mmhmm.
- Muha** Okay.
- Matthew** Yep, we got involved—the organization got involved. We went out there. We marched out there with Hispanic people. Hispanic people—there was[sic]

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Hispanic people that didn't like the idea and they'd march along beside us, you know, but they never hired us back, and right now, I don't know – have[sic] Jeannie [Economos] taken you out to – to – to – to the – where they[sic] corn is? Where they[sic] working in the corn.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew Well, right now out there was all African Americans doing all that work out there, but now it's nothing but Hispanic people.

Muha Okay.

Matthew They...

Muha Uh...

Matthew Just plum out replaced us.

Muha And – and do you know why they did that?

Matthew Well, my – my – my thing is this – and I tell peoples[sic] this all the time, and I used to say this before they replaced us – that one day, we won't have a job, and people used to look at me crazy and they say[sic], "What you talking about?" I say[sic], "One day, you will not be able to come out here on them muck[?] and work here." I say[sic], "It'll be all Hispanic peoples out here working." That was about probably five years before they replaced us. We hadn't heard nobody[sic] talking about replacing us.

Muha Uh huh.

Matthew But I felt that way because, when the Hispanic people come around, the crew leaders would – the – the – the crew leaders that owe – owned a pro – piece of the job would always have a big conversation with them, and, uh, African Americans I truly believe was[sic] replaced because you start – when they start working us, they started working us and giving us our money every day. When we'd leave the job in the afternoon, we were paid off, and if you pay me off and I drink, I'ma[sic] come home and I'ma[sic] drink up my money, and tomorrow I'm gon'[sic] be sick and I'm not able to come to work. So your job is still going on, but I'm so sick 'cause I done[sic] got my money overnight and I'm drunk. I can't come to work. That kind of stuff was going on, and there were many years you could see, at the ending of the season – every season have[sic] an ending. There was[sic] a lot of crops to be throwed[sic] away,

Muha Hm.

Matthew 'Cause the manpower wasn't there to work it, because you pay me every night, I feel like, *I – no, I ain't goin' to work tomorrow. I got me some money in my pocket.*

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Muha Yeah.

Matthew That's the way I feel about it. I don't know how anybody else feel[sic], but I feel that African Americans begin to lag on the job. You give them all that power and now you want to snatch it down from them. So the best way to snatch it away from them is to replace them, and that's what they did. It was—it was sad. The year they replaced them, it was sad, 'cause I was out there. I was, uh, working.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew And it was really sad. We didn't have no[sic] job, and if you was a person worked[sic] seven days a week out there, and they replace you and you ain't[sic] got nothing coming in—boy, it's—it's hard.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew It is hard.

Muha Mmhmm. So, um—so this was—just for the recording—in 1996, uh, through 1998?

Matthew It was in the '90s.

Muha What was in the [inaudible]...

Matthew I think it was in the earlier '90s.

Muha But in 1996 to 1998...

Matthew Mmhmm.

Muha A lot of the farms around Lake Apopka were shut down.

Matthew Mmhmm.

Muha Um, but this was before that, you're saying, when—when the black farmworkers were replaced?

Matthew Replaced, yeah.

Muha Replaced, yeah.

Matthew Mmhmm, I think it was about '92-'90—'91-'92—'92/'93.

Muha Okay.

Matthew When African Americans was[sic] replaced.

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- Muha** Uh huh.
- Matthew** And then right after that the farmworkers – the farm was shut down.
- Muha** And do you remember...
- Matthew** Only one farm was left open. That's what they called the Sang[?] Farms.
- Muha** Uh huh, and do you remember, uh – so before that – before – while – while you were still working, what were – what were relations like between black farmworkers and Mexican farmworkers, Or Hispanic or Caribbean farmworkers?
- Matthew** There wasn't any relationship because when they – when they – when they – if you go to work, and a Spanish person is in what we call "the stall," in one of the positions on the machine or whatever, he don't say nothing[sic] to you, you don't say nothing[sic] to him.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** I mean, you work. If he say[sic] something to you, then you, you know – we try to – most American – most – most African-American people probably my age and down took Spanish in school.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** So we try to, you know, [*laughs*] comprehend the little Spanish that we...
- Muha** Yeah.
- Matthew** Took in school. "Good morning." "How you doing?" "My name is this," and...
- Muha** Right.
- Matthew** So on.
- Muha** Right.
- Matthew** Eh, but if they don't say anything to us, we work all day and don't say anything to them.
- Muha** Okay.
- Matthew** Mmhmm.
- Muha** So...

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- Matthew** And then there was a Mexican guy come[sic] around named Mexican Pete. He start[sic] getting – organizing farmworkers and then he got a crew – he the only Mexican that had a crew, but he went to school and he learned English really good[sic], so all Afri – all African Americans likeded[sic] him.
- Muha** Mmhmm, when did you start noticing, uh, Hispanic farmworker – like a presence of Hispanic farmworkers on – on farms in Apopka and in Florida?
- Matthew** Yeah, well, on farms in Apopka, I started noticing them – a large percentage of ‘em in 1989.
- Muha** Hm.
- Matthew** Mmhmm.
- Muha** So that’s when a lot had come or a lot had – you had noticed a lot of them, that had already been there...
- Matthew** Mm...
- Muha** But now made up a large segment or...
- Matthew** They was[sic] coming.
- Muha** They were coming? Okay.
- Matthew** Mmhmm.
- Muha** Okay, and, um – and yeah, so I mean, how did that – did that change the workplace at all before a lot of the black farmworkers were fired, as you say?
- Matthew** Did it change?
- Muha** Yeah, I mean, was – was there something different about, um, the workplace or the way the crew leaders treated you or anything like that?
- Matthew** No, it wasn’t – they – hm, they just come[sic] to us and just told us what it was going be, and the crew leaders told the crew leaders, so the crew leaders probably held it under they[sic] belt a week – didn’t want to tell us, and then finally, it got out.
- Muha** Mmhmm.
- Matthew** And then, when it got out, a lot of people didn’t want to believe it, you know? Well, those like me that were smart and – and knew it was going to happen, felt like it was going to happen, went on and looked for a job.

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Muha Okay.

Matthew You know?

Muha So...

0:31:11 **Educational programs, retraining, and unemployment**

Matthew Most of it—most of the farmworkers, they, um, had programs trying to get them to go to school, but a lot of farmworkers could not go to school. They[sic] hands all cramped all up like that with arthritis, and they[sic] feet[sic] and stuff all messed up from all the, uh, sores and stuff working on the farm.

Muha Right.

Matthew And they—they just—they just could not—could not, um, take—they was[sic] offering us typing classes and computer classes and—wasn't none[sic] of us computer literate at all, so...

Muha Yeah.

Matthew It just was a mess.

Muha Uh huh.

Matthew So I—I landed a job taking people to school every morning.

Muha Okay.

Matthew You know, picking them up in the evening for the trainings, but they knew that—the state knew that eventually they was gonna be that—deal with that. So the program close[sic] down and left the people shut out again. So you kept promising us—they kept promising us and promising us and trying to open up doors, and the doors that they were opening up, like the computer classes, they didn't last long. The truck-driving classes did—I can't tell you not[sic] a one man that got a job with the truck driving school.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew It just—every—there wasn't nothing[sic] falling through. So right now, those of us that worked in the fields—all the promises that you made to us, right now, we don't believe nothing[sic] you got to say. Don't come telling me nothing[sic] about, "Well, they gonna open up a program, and this program going to help farmworkers do this," 'cause I'm not going to believe it because I've been deceived so many times. So that's where we are now. So most of the farmworkers that work now, they'll sit. They can't do nothing[sic]. They're on disability [insurance]. Our young farmworkers, you know—you done sprayed us

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with your chemicals all your life – all our life, because most children start working in the fields back in them[sic] days when you was[sic] six years old, you know? You take your children to work with you, but then, when it got in the – in the '9 – '80s, they: "Oh, you can't bring your children in the field no more." The damage is done. I had a daughter – three – had a stroke at three years old.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew Because she was in the field with me every day.

Muha Right.

Matthew You know? The damage is done. You done took 'em out there for a few years, and then in the '80s, they decided that they wouldn't let you – you bring your children in the field no[sic] more.

Muha Mmhmm, alright. So – so you said after – after a lot of the black farmworkers were fired, most of them went to school on some program?

Matthew Mmhmm, yeah.

Muha [inaudible]...

Matthew Yeah.

Muha Numerous skills. Do you know what happened – So after they went to school, did they – did some of them find jobs in oth – other industries or...

Matthew The only...

Muha Do you know what happen to [inaudible]?

Matthew Well, the only ones found[sic] jobs – the only African-Americans[sic] women...

Muha Right.

Matthew That found jobs was because of me, because there wasn't a list of who were[sic] hiring you. There was a list of – for[sic] you could go and go to school to be retrained.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew That's what they claimed. They was[sic] retraining us into other job fields, but what I did is[sic] I called different agencies that knew where women can get medical training, and a lot of women went to the medical training and they got jobs in nursing homes. They become what they call a "tech[nician]." They got jobs in nursing homes, they got jobs in shelters for boys and shelters for the

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handicapped, and the men – the men – they were hard – they were hard for the men. We got mens[sic] and – and – work up until [inaudible], and then they started dying. We lost a lot of farmworkers. Uh, at points you go to a funeral every weekend.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew Somebody you worked beside have[sic] died.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew Well, it was hard for a man to get a job. So the – the women became head of the house, and that's when they lost their hand with the childrens[sic]. No respect in the house, because the man wasn't there to put – to say nothing, 'cause you're not putting nothing in here, so the child[sic] looking at – you're not putting nothing in here, so you don't have no say here. So the – the bigger boys – they bullied their mama and all of that. So right now there's a lot of crisis in people[sic] home, because the father was put out of work due to the closing of Lake Apopka.

Muha Uh huh.

Matthew They want to make Orange County this big metropolitan area. They swiped up all the orange trees. You can't go pick oranges, but when you were – when you – when all of this stuff exists, you could take your childrens[sic] to the grove and make 'em work. You – I could take you on a street here in Apopka, right now, with about 60 or 70 young men just standing on the corner, but they graduated from high school.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew But they still live home with their mama. They don't think they[sic] got[sic] to go to work. The runs – they rule they[sic] mama[sic] house, but with me, it was a different story, because your butt was gonna go to work. You wasn't[sic] gon'[sic] live in here and don't[sic] work, you know, but a lot of parents scared[sic] of their children. They was[sic] afraid. They [inaudible] this day.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew The – the young boys run they[sic] mama's house.

Muha Mmhmm. Hm.

Matthew It's – it – it – it hurt us. It hurt us and I don't think – I don't think that our leaders of our country understand that. I don't think they understand that – you got – and it's so easy. It's so easy to understand. You[sic] got to realize we come from slavery. We were poor. We were ran[sic] down all our lives. Now, you want us

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not to apply? The same thing you did to me not to apply it to my child? So my child disrespect[sic] me, because my child can say, "I'll call the police on you." Police come on out, what they gon' do? Handcuff me and take me to jail, because I whipped his butt, 'cause he stayed out all night long. That's the way things are now.

Muha Hm.

Matthew And it really hurt the parent. It hurt—killing the parent. You can't be a parent in your own house. Mm-mm. I got a 22-year-old grandson here with me. He just come[sic] back here. Last Saturday morning, I woke up, he laying[sic] in my bedroom with a girl. I said, "What is this?" I called him out and talked with him. This is no respect. All my life I respect[sic] my children. Now, this is no respect.

Muha Jm.

Matthew So I give[sic] him time[sic] period to get out of here. I'm not going—I don't have to tolerate with that. I don't have to tolerate with[sic] that, but you don't want to go look for a job. He do[sic] not go look for a job. Daily, he laying[sic] up in here. You can't—you—I mean, lack of work causing[sic] a lot of problems in your home, and there's no work here for a young man.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew There's no work.

Muha Mmhmm. Well, thank you for telling me all[sic] that.

Matthew Hm.

0:38:27 **Environmental justice and labor rights**

Muha Um, so, I wanted to ask about ray[?]—okay, so I wanted to ask about—we were talking about, you know, what a lot of farmworkers did after they were either fired or after the shutdown of Lake Apopka farms. Um, for you—I—I know that you got involved in a lot of environmental justice work.

Matthew Yes.

Muha And I—I was wondering if you could tell me about that.

Matthew Well, I was, um, like I said, advocating for poor people[sic] rights for a long time. Very young kid wi—with the organization, and, um, when I start[sic] with—working with the environment people in Orange County, it was like a different ballgame. I organized and organized and organized peoples[sic] to come to m—meetings, where we could talk about the rights of farmworkers, of laws that needed to be put in for farmworkers. Um, the first law I worked with was

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asking – giving farmworkers the right to know what type of pesticide was being used in the work area.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew That was the first law that we fought for. Finally, years of fighting in Tallahassee, years of walking the floors, I, um – they passed the law.¹ They finally passed the law.

Muha What?

Matthew Finally, they passed the law, giving us the right to know what type of farm work we were – what type of pesticide we were working in, after about 20 percent of African Americans in Apopka had passed away.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew And, um, we continue to fight for other improvements, like drinking clean drinking water in the fields.

Muha Right.

Matthew When I was there, there wasn't clean drinking water. We finally got that deal passed, um, where we could have clean drinking water in the fields. Um, better working equipment for farmworkers, like rubber gloves, rubber boots, rain coats.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew And stuff like that. Some of the companies got away with it, but some of the companies went on and bowed down and gave us the equipment we – the proper equipment we needed to work in. Um, as far as going to the doctor, like accidents happen bad[sic] in the fields, and, um, we would go to the company doctor. Finally, we managed to get around that and, um, get a good – good – better medic[sic] care – medical care.

Muha Yep.

Matthew When we'd get cut sometimes, you know, we work with knives...

Muha Right.

Matthew And – and sometimes we get cut. Like you[sic] working here and somebody working there, they got[sic] their knives set up and you[sic] doing this here all day and your arm – elbow hit the knife and bust[sic] it all open. You got[sic] to

¹ Alfredo Bahena Act.

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go to the hospital, and they don't take you to the hospital. They take you to a regular doctor, and he patch[sic] you up and send[sic] you home.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew We finally got, you know, help with that, but a lot of changes. We see a lot of changes, but it's[sic] still a long way to go.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew Still a long way to go because they're still using pesticide. They're still making pesticide. They're still using pesticide. Our babies are still being born deformed, so we have a long way to go.

Muha Yeah, yeah. Absolutely, and, you know, you mentioned your – your kids and your grandkids...

Matthew Mmhmm.

Muha A few times throughout this. I – I'm wondering how they perceived farm labor. Did any of them have interest in doing that, or...

Matthew Well, my kids worked the fields.

Muha Right.

Matthew All six of my kids worked the fields. My grandkids never worked the fields, because when they came along, I was stone against them going in the fields. Um, they came along at the ending of the term, where[sic] children were no longer to go out there anyway. So they didn't get a chance to work the fields, but, um, all of my kids did.

0:42:53

Fed Up: The High Costs of Cheap Food by Dale Finley Slongwhite

Muha Mmhmm. Okay, and, um, lastly from you, I think, I wanted to ask about the book, *Fed Up*[: *the High Costs of Cheap Food*], um, by Dale Finley Slongwhite. Um, could you tell me a little bit about that and your part in that?

Matthew *Fed Up* is a book that I'm proud of and I'm not proud of. The reason I say "I'm proud of," because[sic] it was the first book that I ever had been involved in, and "I'm not proud of" is because I think that I left a lot out the book, and, um, I wanted to do three versions of the book. So I had[sic] talked with, um, what's her name?

[phone rings]

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Matthew Do a second version and a third version, but if I can do the second version, maybe I could capture a lot of stuff I left out.

[*phone rings*]

Matthew It's like I was saying, um, there's a lot I want to add to *Fed Up*. Um, and I would like more pictures in the book, because, um, peoples[sic] really need to actually see what our peoples[sic] are going through – um, the lesions on the s – the legs, the feet, the amputations of the toes, the amputation of the feet, legs – because of all of the pesticide where it had deteriorated the skin, and, um, I'd like to get more[sic] deeper into the labor camps. It's[sic] a lot that I left out, because I wasn't thinking. I'm thinking that, uh, when the book was gonna be wrote[sic], it gonna be like a mini-book [*laughs*]. I didn't realize it was gonna be a story – um, a nice book. I'm just looking at it like it's gonna be a – be a little, short mini-book, and, um, I imagine everybody that played a part in the book – about eight of us – I would imagine if – if everybody can really redo their story, it'll be more awesome than what it is.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew Because a lot of people left out stuff that should've been told, you know? There was a – um, a lot of death in our family, due to, um, the DDT² that they used. People lost their family, and they didn't talk about that in the book. Um, how we come from work and we[sic] riding on the bus, and when we get home, we think the other person sitting over on the bus sleeping[sic]. The person dead[sic], because of the chemicals that we worked in all day long.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew We didn't talk about that in the book, and I would like to, you know, let people know these things actually happen. You[sic] going home from work and when you get there you[sic] hollering, "Mr. Clyde! Mr. Clyde!" And you – "Mr. Clyde!" You think he[sic] sleep. He[sic] dead, you know?

Muha Yeah.

Matthew Those things happen, and we didn't talk about none of that in the book. We didn't know how much room or space or whatever we had in the book.

Muha Yeah.

Matthew So I asked her about second and third version, and we didn't – a lot of stuff – when I read the book, on my – my part of the book, I – I wasn't pleased. I wasn't happy with – with – with the part that I wrote – that she wrote for me, and then I read the other people[sic] part, and I know their history, and same thing with

² Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, a pesticide banned in 1972.

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them. You know, they don't talk about it, 'cause[sic] when you say, uh, "We gon'[sic] write a book." You know, you – you never wrote a book before, so you[sic] not – you[sic] not thinking good, you know?

Muha Yep, right.

Matthew But if we can – another book could re – be redid[sic] [*laughs*], it'd be awesome.

Muha Yep.

Matthew We left a lot out.

0:47:11 **Sexual abuse by crew leaders**

Muha Well, is there anything – you said you – there are things you wanted – wish you could've included. Is there anything that you haven't told me thus far that you want to include in this interview? Uh...

Matthew Well, in – in – in the book? I talked a little about the treatment of the African-American women and the crew leaders. Not the growers, the crew leaders. I talked just a little bit about that. That should've been brought wide open. Should've been blowed[sic] up, because a lot of young girls have babies – they'll never know who the father[sic], because the crew leaders and his[sic] what we call "henchmens"[sic] would come in and have sex with those girls like they was – they wanna, you know?

Muha Yeah.

Matthew And we didn't express too much of that in the book.

Muha Right.

Matthew You know? If you had a father that drank, a mother that drank – oh, God. You didn't have nobody[sic] in your corner. The crew leaders do whatever they want to do. Mmhmm, yeah.

Muha Mmhmm.

Matthew As I can recall, one time I was going – my mom had got[sic] me up early. Uh, our day begin[sic] by five o'clock, and she sent me to the store to get a loaf of bread and there was a man waiting in the dark on me when I got to get the bread, and he jumped right at me and grabbed me, but I was so fast I snatched the loaf from him and I ran home and I told my mom, and my mom went over there and my mom jumped on the man and told him don't try anything like that on none[sic] of her childrens[sic] again in life. She would kill him, and I – we never had problems with him again, but just imagine if I had a mama that didn't do that. Every time he saw me, he would've give[sic] me a problem.

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- Muha** Yep.
- Matthew** But my mama let him know that, you know, she was not taking no crap like that.
- Muha** Right.
- Matthew** But then a lot of the girls, their mama never say[sic] one word, and it went over and over and over again.
- Muha** Uh huh.
- Matthew** Mmhmm.
- Muha** Thank you for telling me that.
- Matthew** Yes.
- Muha** Is there anything else you want to tell me before we conclude the interview?
- Matthew** That's it.
- Muha** That's it.
- Matthew** That's about it.
- Muha** Okay. Well, thank you so much, Geraldean.
- Matthew** Okay.
- Muha** Again, this was Jared Muha and Geraldean Matthew on October 30th, 2014.

0:49:35 **RECORDING CUTS OFF**

0:49:35 **Modern farm labor and Hispanic workers**

- Muha** Okay, this is Jared Muha with Geraldean Matthew on October 30th again, uh, for a second session interview. Um, Geraldean, I wanted to ask, uh, what is your impression of, uh, farms today in Florida and, you know, treatment of Latino workers, uh, who are on the farms?
- Matthew** You know, the farms today have changed very much because now most farmworkers, uh, get their own place to stay, but, as for the Latino workers—women—the ones that are still housed in labor camps, they are treated really bad[sic] by the crew leaders. If they are undocumented and have daughters, the crew leaders think that the daughter should be their woman or their wife or their girlfriend, and they mistreat the women very bad[sic]. Um, what brought that to

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my attention was, uh, when I was doing HIV³ prevention, went into the homes talking and, um, passing out, uh, HIV materials on the camps, uh – how the men would treat the women when they tried to get protection. They didn't want the women to get condoms for – from us or female condoms from us or whatever. So it's a problem to me, because it seems like nobody[sic] really paying that Latino group attention, just like they didn't pay the African-American group attention back in the '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s. So, um, it kind of bothers me a lot, you know, seeing that happening, and, um, seeing how the women have to take up their young children – their young daughters and run at night and try to find another place when the crew leaders come, um, pounding on their doors and demanding that they open the doors and demanding for[sic] sex. I don't think that should be like that, and yes, it does disturb me.

0:51:28

Closing remarks

Muha Mmhmm. Well, thank you for telling me that. Uh, is there anything else you wanted to include?

Matthew That's it.

Muha Okay.

Matthew That's all.

Muha So this is Jared Muha and Geraldean Matthew on October 30th, 2014.

End of Interview

³ Human immunodeficiency virus.