

## 'If they call me today, I am ready'



Paul Dickens plans to start his own business with money saved from his former Cape job.

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ADELPHI, Jamaica — On a warm day in early August, Britney and Jodey-Ann Barnes were on their summer break.

With no school to attend, the two girls were dressed in jeans and brightly colored T-shirts. They ran onto the patio of their house, the linoleum tiles cool on their bare feet, despite the thick humidity that is a constant of the Jamaican summer.

Soon, however, their months of freedom would be at an end, and Britney, 10, and Jodey-Ann, 4, would have to return to school. And as the girls prepared to return to their lessons, their parents had some arithmetic of their own to do.

They expected Britney's textbooks to cost about 11,000 Jamaican dollars; her uniforms would run another 7,000 Jamaican dollars. The sum — about \$255 U.S. — is not exorbitant, said their father, Leroy Barnes, but, unable to find work and running low on savings, he was worried about the cost.

"If I had my job in the United States, it would be OK," said Barnes, who, until this year, worked for five summers as a waiter and bartender at the Flying Bridge Restaurant in Falmouth.

For Barnes and hundreds of other Jamaican workers who have forged strong, long-term ties with their Cape employers, the H-2B visa program represents a chance to improve their lives back in their home country.

With jobs in Jamaica scarce, wages low, and inflation rampant, regular seasonal employment on Cape Cod can allow them to build a house, pay for their children's schooling, or start a business.

This year, however, a cap on H-2B visas locked out most Cape employers, and almost none of the workers who make the annual migration from Jamaica to Cape Cod and back were able to return to their accustomed positions. Left with the strange feeling of being stranded in their own country, they are assessing their options and planning their next move while their dreams are put on hold.

The Jamaica in which these workers live is a very different country from the lavish, indulgent island that is sold to a million tourists each year.

As in most developing economies, the prosperity of Jamaica's citizens varies widely. But reminders of the country's widespread poverty and frequent violence are never far from sight.

In many neighborhoods of Kingston, the capital city, homes and shops no larger or sturdier than garden sheds are roofed with rusting corrugated metal. In Montego Bay, half-built, cinder-block houses and squatter's shacks cling to the steep sides of hills overlooking the crowded downtown.

In the mountain towns, it is not uncommon to see young girls carrying empty jugs to roadside spigots. Many towns lack water service to individual houses.

When the route to Barnes' home turns off the main highway and ascends into the hills south of Montego Bay, the road quickly becomes narrow and pothole-scarred. On an afternoon last month, traffic was being held up by armed police officers stopping almost every car to search for drugs, weapons or other contraband.

Later, as a sudden rainstorm swept over the mountain town of Adelphi, Barnes sat on the porch railing in front of his modest white house. Wearing a green shirt bearing the word "Jamaica," he told the story of what working in the United States has meant to him and his family.

He first learned from a friend about the possibility of going abroad to work.

He pursued the opportunity because of what he thought it could mean for his family: a better home, education for his daughters, savings to lean on in case of future emergencies.

"It is very hard to be away from family, but whatever you work there, it's bottom line, to make things a little better," he said, as Britney and Jodey-Ann sat nearby, competing for space on a plastic patio chair.

In years past, after working on the Cape during the region's busy summer, Barnes worked each winter at the Coral Cliff Hotel, a jungle-themed resort in the heart of Montego Bay's tourist district.

When he came back to Jamaica last October, however, the hotel had come under new management and had already finished hiring by the time he inquired about his old job.

Since then, he had been offered just one job, as a dining room supervisor in Montego Bay. The pay, however, was far too low — less than \$100 (U.S.) per week — and he turned down the position.

"To be honest, it's brutal," he said. "I am only depending on the money I saved up over the time I was working and it's really at the bottom of the cup now."

For some, being unable to work on the Cape is financially and emotionally challenging, but not devastating.

"I am enjoying being home — don't get me wrong — but I am missing the Cape crazily," said Paul Dickens, who worked for four seasons as a cook at Molly's Restaurant and Pub in West Yarmouth. "Without a doubt, if they call me today, I am ready. My (stuff) is packed."

Disappointed but unfazed, the articulate and self-confident Dickens recently started work in the kitchen of Jerky's, a popular Montego Bay restaurant.

Working on the Cape was about "more," he explained: "To see the world more, meet more people, achieve more success."

On the Cape, he estimated, he could easily make \$260 a week, even after taxes were deducted and his housing paid for. In his new job, he makes about \$100 less, in U.S. dollars, per week.

The minimum wage on the island is \$53 for a 40-hour work week, or \$1.33 per hour. On the Cape, H-2B workers must be paid the federally-determined prevailing wage for the job they perform, generally between \$9 and \$14 per hour.

In previous years, Dickens used his time back in Jamaica and the money he earned in the United States to work on expanding and improving the house he shares with a shifting group of siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews.

Perched at the top of a driveway too steep for a taxi driver to tackle, the house is what Dickens refers to as a "family home." The building has two units with rooms in various stages of renovation and catch basins on the roof that collect rain to provide the home with water. The property was once owned by an ancestor and is now shared among members of the extended family.

This year, however, he will cut back on improvements to the house. He also plans to cut back on his spending so he can live on his earnings from Jerky's and conserve the savings he accumulated working on the Cape.

He wouldn't say how much he has saved, but the Cape money, he said, is key to his plan to launch a business in Jamaica.

The enterprise, however, is in its early stages. He hopes that visas will soon become available again, so he can return to Molly's for another three to five seasons while his company in Jamaica gets off the ground.

The money he made at Molly's also has helped him develop his skills as an amateur DJ.

On a recent day in early August, his house echoed with beats pounding from equipment that his U.S. earnings helped him afford. Eventually, he would have been able to buy the equipment on a Jamaican salary, he said, "but I am talking about great and drastic sacrifice."

He performed an impromptu rap, ending with a semi-growled exhortation to "Interview me, interview me."

"I just do that for fun, but someday I know I am going to have my own studio and record," he said later.

For other workers, the impact of the visa restrictions has been more severe.

Until this year, Michael Doeman has worked for Ponderosa Landscaping in Eastham for seven seasons. As of late July, he had been looking for a job in Jamaica for more than six months.

"Right now, it's all slow here and I can't get any job — it's so miserable," Doeman said.

"If I were at the Cape, I would be working right now," he said, leaning against the patio railing at a busy KFC in downtown Montego Bay. He chose the fast-food restaurant for an interview because he deemed his own neighborhood too dangerous for visitors.

When he is not looking for work, he spends most of his time inside his home, avoiding those unsafe streets. Shootings are not uncommon, he said.

But he wanted to build a home and had to take land where he could afford it, he explained.

"At that time, I couldn't afford one of those lots," he said, gesturing to the stately homes overlooking Gloucester Avenue, the city's main tourist strip.

During his seasons on the Cape, Doeman sent portions of the money he earned back to his extended family, including his four children, nine brothers and four sisters.

Without his expected earnings, Doeman now wonders if he will be able to pay the fees necessary to send two of his children to college this fall.

One of his children would like to study accounting; the other aspires to be an engineer.

Doeman hopes that the visa situation will be resolved before next season, so he can return to the place and the job he cares about.

"I like the Cape a lot," Doeman said. "I just like to work."

Back in Adelphi, Barnes said he keeps in touch with his former co-workers and managers at the Flying Bridge, and all of them have the same question.

They ask, "When are you guys making it back?" he said. "And I got no idea."