

'San Luis' is home away from home for landscape workers

By **Tim Logan**

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On a Monday morning last month, Henry López stooped over a 2-foot shrub with his hedge trimmer, its whine drowning out the steady whirl of tires on blacktop behind him.

Slice. Slice. Slice. A little off the top. And he stepped over to the next one.

Again and again, dozens of times along the perimeter of the Dierbergs parking lot out in Chesterfield, López bent the shrubs into shape. Then he moved on to the squat trees and the islands of grass tucked in amid the asphalt.

"Everything you see that's green, we've got to take care of it," said López's co-worker, Juan Alonzo.

This is why López and Alonzo traveled 1,600 miles from a village in the mountains of northeastern Mexico: to work here in the August heat, trimming endless shrubs and mowing scores of lawns, doing a job that their employers say few Americans will take.

Yes, if immigrants are being pushed out of Mexico by lack of opportunity, they're also being pulled here by an ever-growing demand for the jobs they'll do: in this case hot, dirty work that pays \$8 or \$10 or \$12 an hour.

López and Alonzo came here legally, with a 10-month visa and a job in hand, labor imported through the H-2B temporary worker program. It's been often overlooked in the two-year national tumult over immigration, but it's become increasingly essential to the handful of industries that rely on it. So the businesses have been closely watching the twists and turns of immigration reform, knowing their worker pipeline could dry up at any time.

In St. Louis, no industry relies more on H-2B than landscaping. The program supplies low-level workers to most of the region's big landscape companies: Those companies received over 2,700 visas last year alone, according to the Labor Department.

"There's just nobody here in this area willing to do this work," said Ted Bergman, president of Symmetry Landscaping in Hazelwood. "There are not physically the bodies there to do it."

And the work keeps growing. The landscaping industry has thrived in recent years, jumping from \$28.9 billion in 2002 to an estimated \$41.6 billion in 2004, according to the trade group PLANET.

St. Louis is no different. Every shiny shopping plaza, every new office park, every high-end subdivision that's unfurled across St. Louis, St. Charles and Jefferson counties in recent years must be mowed. Most turn to commercial landscapers.

And that's good news for people like Maurice Dowell.

Dowell and his wife run Dowco Enterprises, a midsize landscaper in Chesterfield. They started mowing almost three decades ago, around sales jobs at Sears, and when they launched their company in 1986, they scrounged to pay employees from their own salaries. Today they employ 38 people, and they drive BMWs.

Dowell used to hire immigrants and trust that the papers they showed him were legitimate. Then, about 10 years ago, he got a scare. A letter from the Social Security Administration said that the numbers on tax forms he was submitting didn't match anything in the agency's database.

"I just knew a white truck would pull up one day, and that would be it," he said.

So he found an immigration lawyer, learned about H-2B, and arranged to bring his workers here legally. He has been using it ever since, and this year brought in 22, including Henry López and Juan Alonzo.

While Dowco does some commercial landscaping, most of its work is high-end residential. Dowco specializes in tending to the acre-plus, \$750,000 homes that have sprouted up across Chesterfield and Wildwood in recent years, and takes a "high touch" approach, with full-service design, irrigation and frequent upkeep — 32 mows a year is standard.

That upkeep is what generates the profit, and most of it is done by his H-2B workers.

"They're the breadwinners," said Dowell, who keeps language tapes and a copy of "Spanish Phrases for Landscape Professionals" on his office bookshelf alongside business books and paperback thrillers.

Like other landscapers, Dowell says he has tried to hire Americans. Right now, he has five on his work crews. But when he advertises his openings — as he must to qualify for H-2B — he gets little interest. The last two years, he got none.

Part of the problem, he says, is the program's timing. To get H-2B workers for spring, Dowco needs to apply for the visas in December. So it needs to advertise in October for an \$8 an hour job that won't start for four months and only lasts nine. And every local company advertises at once.

"The odds are, you're not going to get a lot of individuals who are going to knock your door down," Dowell said. "The system has some flaws."

But he and other landscapers say even when Americans do take jobs, they rarely stick.

Bergman has tried hiring from felony release programs, talking with temp agencies, paying all kinds of salaries.

"People literally show up one day, take a look, and say 'I'm not doing this,' " he said.

So he turns to Mexico.

And if H-2B gets wiped out, both Dowell and Bergman say, the jobs of the Americans they employ — landscape architects, account managers, office staff — probably will too.

"We would not be in business without it," Dowell said.

Yes, the livelihoods of American workers are increasingly tied to that of imported workers, like Juan Alonzo.

The first time Alonzo came north, it was 12 years ago. He walked across the desert. No papers. He had a brother in St. Louis, so he made his way here and got a job. He was working at Dowco when that letter from Social Security arrived 10 years ago, and ever since then he has been on H-2B, legal.

Now he is a supervisor and patrols Dowco's West County turf in a white company pickup, checking in on work crews and meeting with clients. He speaks English. He makes \$17 an hour. He works odds jobs on the weekends for extra cash.

He rents an apartment in Chesterfield, but most of the money goes home, to Palmillas, to his wife and three daughters, ages 7, 5 and 3. And while he does go home each winter and gets an occasional vacation, he has missed a lot of their growing up.

"It's hard," Alonzo said, fingering the ring on his thick left hand. "But if you want a better life, you need to stay here."

He is not sure what will happen if he can't come back next year. He doesn't want to walk across the desert again. But back home he can't make enough to support his girls. Would he come back?

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I try one more time."

But even if he stays home, a lot of people are already here.

Things have changed in San Luis since he first arrived, Alonzo said. Used to be, there were just a couple of Mexican stores. Now they're all over. So are immigrants. Alonzo alone has eight brothers here; one is a naturalized citizen. They come for the jobs, in landscaping, painting, hotels.

"St. Louis has a lot of opportunity for work," he said. "Look everywhere. You see Mexicans working."

tlogan@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8291