

## Guest workers labor here to support families back home

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By:  
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Domingo Braulio and his sons have one of the longest commutes to Chattanooga for work: 1,448 miles one way.

Mr. Braulio, 49, says goodbye to his family in Concepción Chiquirichapa, Guatemala, every year to spend about 10 months working here on a temporary visa for a landscaping company.

"I tell them we come here to work and save money, not to rest," he said as he was getting lawnmowers ready to start his first day of work, less than 12 hours after arriving at the Atlanta airport.

He and 16 Central Americans hired by Dawson Lawn Service Inc. are in the United States under a guest worker program, known as H-2B, that allows them to work for up to one year before returning to their native countries.

Congress limits the number of visas issued under the program to 66,000 per fiscal year. But demand for workers is higher than the number of visas available, said Walter Dawson, who credits the program for helping his business grow.

After almost 20 years in the landscaping business, Mr. Dawson said he couldn't find local reliable workers.

"You can have a revolving door and you can hire a heart beat, but those kind of guys are here for their next check and then are gone till it's gone and then they are looking for a job again," the Brainerd-area businessman said. "You can't build a company based on that kind of person."

Guest worker programs have been in existence since 1942. The H-2A and H-2B programs allow U.S. employers to hire foreign workers for agricultural and nonagricultural seasonal jobs after proving they cannot find local workers.

While employers have lobbied Congress to expand the programs, lawmakers haven't done so because immigration has become a volatile issue, said Charles Kuck, president-elect of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and an adjunct professor at the University of Georgia School of Law.

"Immigration is such a radioactive issue nobody wants to touch it," he said.

The number of visas available should be dictated by the market, not by Congress, he said.

Some organizations that want to reduce immigration say some employers and job contractors abuse the program, which they say puts American workers at a disadvantage.

"Americans should get first crack at every single job in America," Rosemary Jenks, director of government relations for Numbers USA, a nonprofit immigration reduction organization, said. "If and only if the job really can't be filled and the employers have tried recruiting in minority and poor areas, only then should they be able to import foreign workers to do the job."



Staff Photos by Meghan Brown -- Domingo Braulio prunes a tree at an East Brainerd home.

## DOING IT FOR THE FAMILY

Levi Saquich, 18, and his brother, 23-year-old Esduardo, are among the youngest of the group from Guatemala working for Mr. Dawson. They say their jobs in the United States help them support their families in Guatemala.

Mr. Saquich wants to send money to his two younger brothers.

“It makes me feel very proud and happy to know that I’m going to be able to send money home so my little brothers can go to school,” said Mr. Sakich, who finished the equivalent of eighth grade in Guatemala, a higher grade than most of his fellow workers completed.

“Our dad died when we were very young, so we had to start working in the fields,” he said. “When Esduardo and my brother Byron started to come to the United States, they would also send us money to buy food and go to school.”

In Guatemala only elementary school is free, so many children cannot continue their education, he said. Many students go to school for only a few years until they learn Spanish. The Guatemalan workers’ first language is Mam and Quiche, spoken by the Mayan people indigenous to the country.

Working in the United States under the visa program also has become a family venture for the Braulios. Two of Domingo Braulio’s six children, Noe, 27, and Lisandro, 19, and two brothers, Albino, 39, and Santiago, 28, have joined him in the United States the past few years.

The guest workers have to pay their own living expenses, including food, transportation and housing, but they still earn far more than they would in Guatemala.

“Over there you make \$4 or \$5 a day,” Noe Braulio said. “Here we get to save about \$1,000 every month.”

Minimum wage in Tennessee is \$6.93 an hour, but Mr. Dawson said he pays workers according to their experience.

“I usually raise their wage within a few months of their arrival, he said.

Most of them have bought property and vehicles, and sent money to their families back home with the money they earn and save.

Domingo Braulio said he purchased a piece of land in Guatemala for when he grows old and can no longer work in the United States.

“At least it’s something I can call mine and that belongs to my family,” he said.

Albino Braulio bought a home in Highland Park that he pays for every month, even when he returns to Guatemala.

“I’ve been able to better myself here in the United States and in Guatemala,” he said. “I’m able to put my children through school and make sure they have a decent meal at home.”

Domingo Braulio has traveled to the United States for work since 2001. Although his departure saddens his wife each year, he said he has a clear choice: work in the United States or struggle to support his family back home.

In Guatemala, he grows potatoes, plums, apples and corn, but he said that’s unreliable work.

“Crops sell for very little money and can be easily ruined by weather conditions,” he said in Spanish.



## THE PROGRAM

Mr. Dawson has used the temporary guest worker program since 2001. Domingo Brualio was the first employee he hired through the program.

He learned about the visa program at a landscaping conference. According to the Tennessee and Georgia departments of labor, the industries that request the H-2B visas are primarily landscaping, tree planting, construction and, more recently, hotel resorts.

Applying for temporary workers is a long process, Mr. Dawson said, but this year he was lucky — he was able to bring 17 workers from Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. This year's cap was reached within the first few days that the visas became available.

Opponents argue that the current system doesn't have safeguards to prevent guest workers from remaining here.

"We should have a system to ensure they leave when they are supposed to, which we don't have right now," Ms. Jenks said.

Albino Brualio said he would never consider staying here illegally.

"Right now I have everything in order, nothing worries me because I'm doing everything right, but when you are here illegally you are always worried that they are going to deport you," he said. "I couldn't live like that."

Mr. Dawson said all of his workers except for three Americans, including his son, are here under the visa program.

"They are people I trust and that I know will respect my clients," he said. "They have become friends and family."

## CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Earning a living in a foreign country presents work and cultural challenges to the Saquiches and Braulios.

Levi Saquich said he spent his first few weeks in the United States learning how to use gas-powered tools and to live in an American neighborhood.

"Over there we never use this type of machine," he said about the weed cutters and lawn mowers. "In Guatemala we use hoes and rakes, nonelectrical tools."

Domingo Brualio said in Guatemala people don't cut and maintain the grass — they get rid of it.

"The trees are for growing fruit, not to have them next to the house for shade," he said. "Here you have Wal-Mart open every day, all the time, and you don't have to worry about water, or electricity, but over there it's different."

Noe Brualio said most people in their village didn't have telephones in their home until about eight years ago.

"We would record something in cassettes, send it to our relatives here in the United States, and then they would receive it, record something and send it back," he said.

"It was very sad because you would miss your family, but you couldn't talk to them," he said. "Now we call back home every week so they don't worry about us."

This year Esduardo Saquich brought his wife, Shenya, and his brother, Levi, with him to make the transition easier.

"It was very hard last year when I stayed behind," Mrs. Saquich said. "We had just gotten married."

His brother in Guatemala, Milton Saquich, said in a telephone interview that the money sent home helps.

"With that money we buy food, we go to the doctor if someone gets sick ... there are no work opportunities here (in Guatemala)," he said.

“We know they are going to come back ... as the months pass by, we eagerly wait for their return and celebrate when the day finally comes,” he said.

## LIVING IN TWO WORLDS

The workers said Guatemala is their home, but they don't deny it's easy to get used to the luxuries they said life in the United States brings them.

“After so many years of coming, you get used to this way of life,” Domingo Braulio said. Here he rents a house in Highland Park, where most of the other workers live.

Most are used to driving, having their own homes and buying all of their clothes and food in American stores.

Over the years many of them have built relationships and separate lives in Chattanooga.

Albino Braulio helped found the Hispanic Church of God, a Pentecostal church on Dodds Avenue, last year. When he arrived earlier this month, church members were waiting for him.

Last week he was named the church elder, a privilege and an honor, he told the group of about 60 members.

“I live by God's words and even though here I work in the landscaping industry, when I go back to Guatemala I dedicate my time to God and spreading his teachings,” Albino said. “And I'm happy doing them both.”