

## On midway, a world fair

State Fair of Virginia's ride contractor brings global temp work force

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The State Fair of Virginia midway is shown on a recent night. Workers from South Africa, Mexico, Russia and elsewhere keep it running. Photo By: CLEMENT BRITT/TIMES-DISPATCH

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Jojo Kruger is living out a childhood dream.

"I should be paying to see America, but instead I'm getting paid to do it," marveled the South African, who is working as a games operator and stock-control manager on the midway at the State Fair of Virginia.

Kruger, 27, is employed seasonally by midway operator Deggeller Attractions of Stuart, Fla.

He's one of about 100 foreign workers traveling the fair circuit with Deggeller. Of these, about 30 are South African, 30 Mexican and the rest from other countries. Employees from abroad make up more than half of the firm's mobile labor pool, running games and rides and selling tickets and concessions.

Kruger has advice for newbies to the U.S.

"I tell people to be prepared to get a culture shock."

Alexander Zhelnovach, 23, said Americans are friendlier than people in his native Russia. "In my country, people look nervous. Here, they are smiling and laughing."

And should they wish to share an occasional private conversation, said Mantoné Ferreira, she and friends switch to speaking Afrikaans, one of the 11 official languages of South Africa. Ferreira, 22, sells ride tickets; her sister, Chantelle, 24, works at a midway game.

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Foreign employees work the midway for a number of reasons. "A lot of the South African kids are raising money for school," said Andy Deggeller, operations manager.

Others, such as Kruger, are saving money to start a business. The majority of Mexican employees are working to send money to families back home, Deggeller said.

Deggeller advertises for U.S. workers. "But it's hard to get people who want to travel," he said. About 80 local workers were hired this year by Deggeller for the State Fair of Virginia.

Many foreign workers are in the U.S. on H2B visas, which allow foreign nationals to temporarily engage in nonagricultural seasonal or peak-load employment. The maximum stay is 11 months. If they come back for subsequent years, they'll receive an H2R visa. Other workers have a J1, an exchange visa for students, teachers and business trainees.

Workers say they can earn higher wages than those paid at home. A first-year employee makes about \$275 a week, and after several years, as much as \$500.

"You can spoil yourself on the wages here," said Adri Groenewald, 18, who lives in Capetown, South Africa.

Groenewald said workdays at the fair are long -- about 15 hours -- but there is some free time. "We've toured Washington, D.C. We go to malls. We do have our fun."

Deggeller uses recruiters to hire and prescreen employees, including mandatory drug tests.

Workers are provided basic housing (bunk rooms in trailers), insurance and an end-of-season bonus.

Nearly all workers said they were grateful for cooking facilities provided with their housing, as they tend to shun fair food. Workers occasionally gather for a braai, the South African version of a cookout.

"We have international parties," said Belarus native Fiodar Kachanau, 26. "Really we try to drink more water and less alcohol. But I say 'Cheers!' in many languages."

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