

“I CAME HERE TO WORK”



Immigrant horseman
Javier Diaz makes
a life for his family
in Louisiana

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Javier Díaz has been
employed by Clear
Creek Stud for 30 years

IT'S MID-JULY IN SOUTHEAST

Louisiana, and the heat and humidity are nearly suffocating. It's like a sauna at sunrise. A lizard scampers across the gravel road, seeking shelter in the shade of a tractor. The limp leaves and branches of a magnolia tree are motionless.

It's 8 o'clock in the morning at Clear Creek Stud outside of Folsom, La., and the workers (mostly Latino immigrants) are sweating bullets. Everybody pitches in. Forming a human chain they hoist 100-pound bales of alfalfa from a flat-bed truck into the loft of a receiving barn.

The working conditions are no picnic, but a smiling Javier Diaz appears unaffected by the heat. An immigrant documented on an H2A visa (agricultural worker), Diaz is from Castanos Coahuila in northeastern Mexico and has been employed at Clear Creek Stud for 30 years. Gentle and soft-spoken, he moves from barn to barn, horse to horse with a combination of purpose and effortlessness. Content to remain in the background, Diaz appears to be doing nothing, and yet nothing is left undone.

His confidence and ability stem from working with horses as well as cattle on his grandfather's farm in Mexico. The land was harsh and unforgiving, but the extended family made ends meet. "I was just a young boy on the farm," Diaz said. "There, every day I have experience with animals, and the horses were my favorite."

There are no five-star hotels in Castanos Coahuila. Dreams of a brighter horizon triggered Diaz' journey north and across the border. Enough of being strapped to a plow, husking corn, and herding cattle. Diaz was 22 when he crossed.

"I was with some friends, and we travel together. We were looking for work," he recalled. "First we went to Texas and worked and then to Louisiana. Everything was a big change, but we were excited."

The good news is there are no cubicles, time clocks, job descriptions, or dress codes on a Thoroughbred farm such as Clear Creek Stud. The bad news? The work week can be seven days—and Diaz shows up for all of them.

"Nobody can do the work like me," he said with a laugh. "I came here to work. This is not play. It is a way of life just like in Mexico. When you love the horses, you can understand them and see what they need and when they need it."

Diaz is married, and he and his wife, Alana, have raised four children: two boys and two girls. With new roots deep in the Louisiana soil, they have a modest home a few minutes' walk from the foaling barn. The 54-year-old Diaz keeps it simple when describing his experience of living in the United States.

"Life is better here for me and my family," he said before entering the round pen to break a yearling. "There is less violence than in my country. The farm is natural and quiet for us. You don't hear the traffic or sirens like in the city. You can work every day. Here



Diaz, 54, breaks yearlings, exercises and gallops 2-year-olds, and does sales prep

in this country you are not poor if you want to work."

Except for a two-week vacation during the Christmas holidays, the farm is Diaz' refuge. An occasional van trip into New Orleans is an irritant.

"The short trip is better," he said. "When I have to go, I want to come right back. Here is where I feel safe."

"Todos simpatico," Diaz said, lapsing into Spanish. The phrase roughly translates to "everything is nice, friendly, and likeable."

Except for defrosting the office refrigerator, no task is off limits for Diaz. Sunrise to sunset, he is all over the 280 acres of the farm. Over the years Diaz and Clear Creek's owner and general manager Val Murrell have become more of a team than an employer/employee relationship.

"On a horse farm things can turn upside down in a second," Murrell said. "When it's 3 o'clock in the morning and we have a busted, frozen pipe in the winter, I've got Javier on speed dial. If there was a way for science to clone Javier, my life would be much easier."

Time creates intimacy. The communication between the two men is a matter of mutual trust.

"Javier can see and remember things that I have forgotten," Murrell said. "With our workers it has developed into more of a

family. My daughter used to babysit Javier's children. We go to each other's birthday parties. Believe me, our staff's wives make the best cakes and pastries you will ever taste."

Diaz is not above mucking stalls, but his primary responsibilities have expanded to being a veterinarian tech assistant, monitoring medications, and taking temperatures.

He breaks the yearlings, exercises and gallops the 2-year-olds, and does sales prep. The training track, round pen, and the open grass paddocks are where Diaz is most comfortable. In 30 years on the farm, he has incurred only one serious injury, a broken ankle when thrown off a horse.

“

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— VAL MURRELL

“Here on this spot is where I teach them to go to the racetrack,” he explained. “I watch them and make sure they are healthy and safe. The first thing about being around horses is to be careful for them and for yourself.”

Owner and breeder Evelyn Benoit is a frequent visitor to Clear Creek Stud.

“In my opinion, Javier and his people are irreplaceable,” Benoit said. “When he is breaking one of

my babies and he looks me in the eye and says he likes the horse, you can take it to the bank. There is something in that look. Every time he has done that, the horse has been a winner or even a stakes winner. He just knows horses backward and forward. In this day and age you are not going to find many people with his dedication and single focus to caring for horses.”

No one is closer to Diaz than farm manager Michelle LaVoice. From the time Diaz arrived at the farm, the two have been inseparable.

“We helped each other learn Spanish and English together,” LaVoice remembered. “His gentle, soft-spoken touch translates to the horses. What telegraphs from his hands and knees is what makes the difference. The horses stay more relaxed. He doesn't



Diaz: ‘Nobody can do the work like me’



Val Murrell is the general manager of Clear Creek Stud

get in their mouth the way some riders do.”

August 29, 2005, was a date Diaz wished he had been back in Castanos Coahuila. Nature was off the leash. The destructive force of Hurricane Katrina coiled up from the Gulf of Mexico and slammed 110 mile-per-hour winds into southeastern Louisiana.

After the hurricane there were no rainbows. One barn at Clear Creek was completely destroyed, and other barns were seriously damaged. Fences were down. Massive oak trees uprooted and shattered. Horses were loose all over the property. Neighbors with chain saws and workers on the farm pulled together to chisel out a path on the highway to clear the fallen oak trees.

When you take a licking, keep kicking. Diaz went on auto-pilot. “At first when the storm hit, I was not afraid,” he remembered. “The wind was terrible. It just happened so quick. Later there was no electricity. For one month it was total dark at night. The horses were in all different fields, so we had to fix the fences. We got some generators, and we worked until 10 o'clock at night.”

Nothing seems to upset Diaz. His daily workload is accomplished without complaint. Controversy and confrontation are not part of his DNA. There are times, however, if things need to be modified, when the sheep turns into a lion.

“Javier is human,” Murrell pointed out. “When things bother him, he will damn sure let you know. He doesn't stomp his feet or raise hell, but he doesn't bite his tongue. We have a track record of resolving our differences quietly. Fairness is a huge issue with most immigrants. Even if it is one of their friends or family, they will point out who is not pulling their weight.”

Every year LaVoice is required to petition for visa approvals

and provide proof that she cannot recruit and hire American workers to do the jobs. Adhering to legal procedure, LaVoice places ads in four newspapers: one that has circulation in the New Orleans metropolitan area and three newspapers in the surrounding states of Texas, Mississippi, and Arkansas. One of the data elements on the questionnaire asks whether the work to be performed is skilled labor.

A Department of Labor official recently got an earful from the exasperated LaVoice on the skilled labor inquiry.

“I lost it,” LaVoice said. “I invited her and the entire office to make a trip and come out to the farm and see for themselves what the work entails.”

LaVoice’s argument digs deep into present-day American society and culture.

“Put aside the lack of motivation to do these jobs,” LaVoice insisted. “The fact is that our youth are not involved in farm life and dealing with horses anymore. There is no foundation for that kind of work and lifestyle to develop eventual workers. Parents are afraid their kids will get hurt or, even worse, get dirty. Our culture has weaned both the work ethic and the

ability out. So the new bottom line is that not only do you have less people to do the work, they know absolutely nothing about animals or horses if they do show up.”

Gearing down her emotions, LaVoice addressed one of the positive characteristics of Latino immigrant labor.

“Most important is that you don’t have to ask them to pitch in and help,” she said. “They see and know what and when things need to be done. It’s an inclusive culture. You get a new person in, and they train each other without having to be told.”

In the past Diaz was a reliable contact to recruit workers. That pipeline has turned into a drip-by-drip trickle.

“In years past it was easy to invite and ask people to come,” Diaz said with a trace of caution. “Now they read things and get scared and imagine it is not a good idea to come here.”

There is a saying in Diaz’ native country that is a metaphor for pretending not to see the obvious problem: “You can’t use your thumb to block out the sun.”

The saying suggests that, in the months ahead, printing “Help Wanted” signs will not be sufficient to address

labor shortages in the horse racing and breeding industries.

Few people in leadership positions can roll with the punches better than the easy-going Murrell, but he winces in alarm at the mention of operating Clear Creek Stud without immigrant labor. Murrell is not subtle when he hints at the unintended consequences of harsh immigration policy on the industry that has been his life blood.

“You’re going to hear this from people besides me, but if it weren’t for Javier and the people like him, I would be forced to shut these doors in a heartbeat,” he said. “It’s taken 50 or 60 years for it to become obvious, but the American worker is spoiled and pampered. Everybody wants to get a check, but nobody wants to work.”

Now it is high noon, and the heat index is in triple digits. All the farm workers and staff have stopped for lunch, but Diaz is standing outside the farm office, looking at a text message on his iPhone and texting directions to a trainer that is driving to the farm to see his colt gallop. Diaz turns and begins walking to the training track. Time to perform some skilled labor. **BH**



In the future, printing ‘Help Wanted’ signs will not be sufficient to address labor shortages in the industry