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Dairy Workers' Stories Become Graphic Novel

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The Open Door Clinic of Middlebury, Vermont announces *The Most Costly Journey*, a new non-fiction graphic novel detailing the real-life experiences of migrant workers on Vermont dairy farms. The book collects the stories of over 20 different migrant storytellers, as drawn by 15 different cartoonists.

"We hope that these stories can serve as windows into lives that are often lived in the shadows, unnoticed," says project founder Julia Doucet, a nurse at the Open Door Clinic. Doucet and her colleagues noticed undiagnosed symptoms of stress and trauma in her migrant patients, many of whom come from Mexico and Central America to work on local farms. Doucet conceived of a collaborative creative process for crafting comics that gave her patients control over their own healing narratives.

Originally published as individual booklets in Spanish and used as resources for mental health outreach by the Open Door Clinic, the stories have circulated among migrants for years. "There is tremendous power in having your own story heard," notes Doucet, "and it helps to know that your story can connect with others who have lived through similar experiences."

Each comic in the book explores a different aspect of migrant farm life in rural New England, as identified and narrated by a migrant storyteller in their own words. Storytellers chose to focus on separation from their families, language barriers, work issues, substance abuse, and the many challenges of living and working in an unfamiliar place, under dehumanizing conditions. Each storyteller then worked with a cartoonist to create an original comic that educates readers, and connects them with valuable healthcare resources.

"To cartoon a piece of somebody else's life story is a great honor – and a learning process," says New Hampshire cartoonist Marek Bennett, who has drawn three different booklets for the project. Bennett often found himself redrawing many pages of his artwork, based on feedback from the storytellers. "We have to really listen to each other, see each other, and learn from each other," he says. "Then we share our discoveries with the reader, and the process begins all over again."

"Without that whole long process," Bennett says, "some of these stories might never have been told."

The Most Costly Journey graphic novel will be published by the Vermont Folklife Center in February 2021, with proceeds from sales going to support the ongoing work of the Open Door Clinic. It is currently available for pre-order via Kickstarter through 9 November:

www.kickstarter.com/projects/elviajemascaro/the-most-costly-journey-graphic-novel

"The Most Costly Journey" (in Spanish, "El viaje más caro") is a non-fiction cartooning and graphic medicine project that employs collaborative storytelling as a tool to mitigate loneliness, isolation, and despair among Latin American migrant farm workers on Vermont dairy farms. The Most Costly Journey is a collaboration between the Open Door Clinic, Vermont Folklife Center, UVM Extension Bridges to Health, UVM Anthropology, and Marek Bennett's Comics Workshop.

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