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Their Shared Fate

A documentary examines the bond between local apple farmers and migrant workers

By: Greg Ryan



Photograph courtesy of Chatsby Films

The term “migrant worker,” by definition, suggests a role temporary in nature, and may carry a negative connotation in a country mired in an intense debate over illegal immigration. But listen to Robert Minard, the owner of W.G. Minard & Sons apple farm in Ulster County, describe James Johnson, and your perception may change. “He’s like family,” Minard says of Johnson, who has spent four decades working on Minard’s farm through the government-sanctioned Temporary Agricultural Worker Program. “They’re just good people,” he continues, describing the migrant workers he employs.

The relationship between workers and farmers is at the center of [Seasons in the Valley](#), a documentary written, directed, and produced by Peekskill-based filmmaker Adam Matalon. Actor Elliott Gould narrates the film, which also features an interview with former governor George Pataki, who reminisces about working with Jamaican laborers on a farm near his childhood home. But the heart of the documentary is the unlikely farmer-worker partnership, and the uncertain future the two groups face as apple farms in the Valley come closer and closer to extinction.

The Jamaicans profiled in the film journey to the Valley every apple-picking season, working 10 hours a day, seven days a week, for eight to 10 months a year. They perform an arduous task the farmers say Americans are unwilling or unable to do; their federally mandated compensation is just a few dollars per hour above minimum wage. Some of the Jamaicans work on the farms, away from their families, in order to finance small businesses back home.

The laborers cope with challenges many immigrants deal with: Workers describe how supermarket cashiers avoid touching the Jamaicans' dark skin when they hand back change. The most serious obstacle facing both farmers and migrants, however, is economic in nature. Valley orchards simply can't compete with Chinese apple farms' prices. And with the recent spate of bad storms, the temptation for owners to cash in on their farms' valuable property is incredibly strong. According to the film, there were 250 apple farms in the Valley in 1980. Now there are about 100. "Most of the farmers will say — and some will say it very clearly — that there aren't going to be apple farms in the Hudson Valley," Matalon says. "This generation is kind of the end of an era."

Seasons in the Valley won best domestic documentary at the 2008 [Queens International Film Festival](#), and will be screened in February at the [Jacob Burns Film Center](#) in Pleasantville. Matalon hopes viewers will consider the important role immigrants play in a distressed local industry. "They want to do their job, and build that home or business," Matalon says. "It should, theoretically, work out for everybody."