

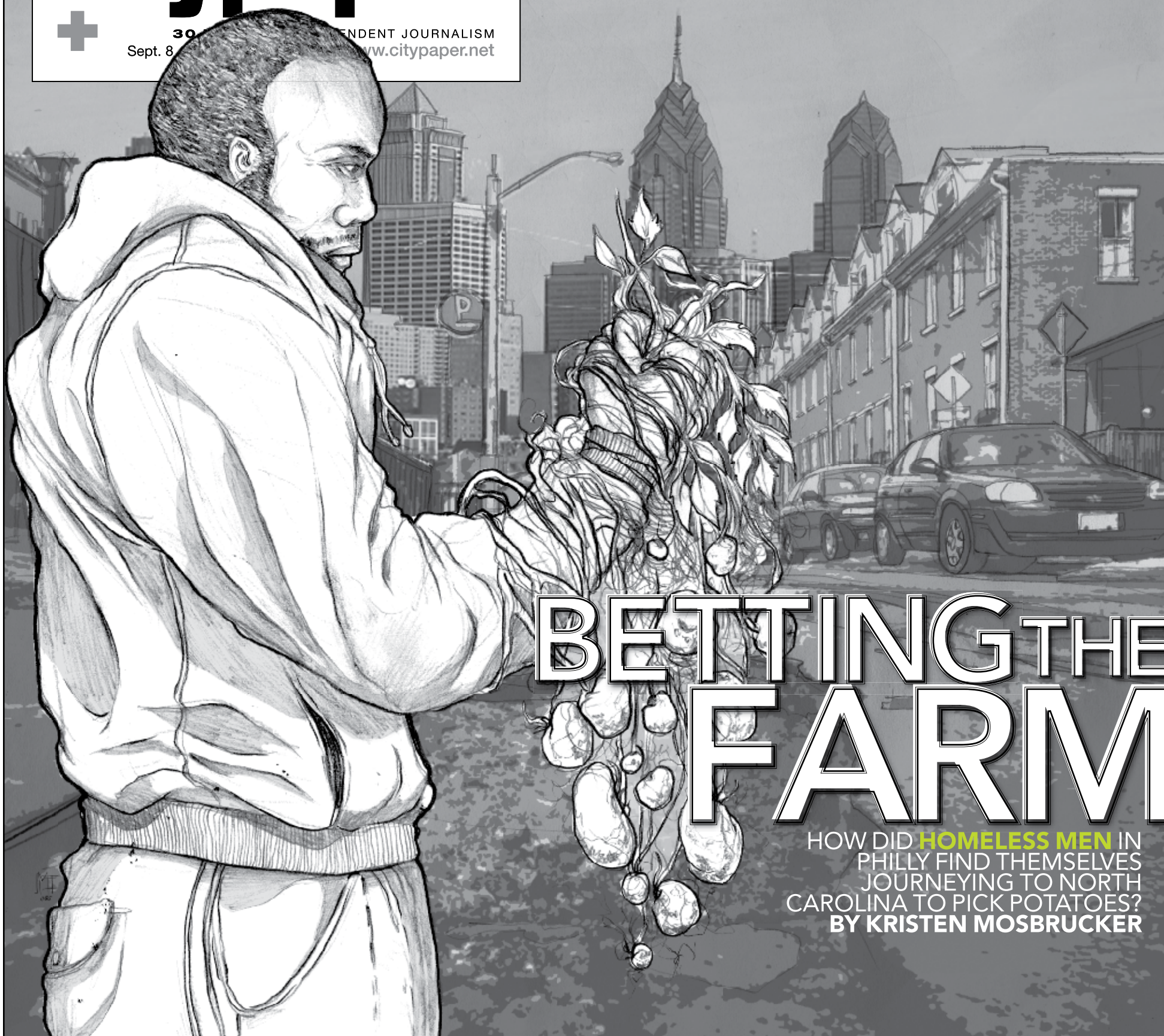
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BETTING THE FARM

HOW DID **HOMELESS MEN** IN
PHILLY FIND THEMSELVES
JOURNEYING TO NORTH
CAROLINA TO PICK POTATOES?
BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER

BETTING THE FARM

WHEN PHILLY **HOMELESS MEN** JOURNEYED TO NORTH CAROLINA TO PICK POTATOES, THEY FOUND MORE — AND LESS — THAN THEY BARGAINED FOR.

BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER

As the faintest glow of sunshine appeared over Philadelphia one morning this past June, Mustafa Rideout crouched down against the wall of Sunday Breakfast Association, a local rescue mission near 13th and Vine streets, waiting.

Along with him were several other men. All, including 24-year-old Rideout — who has lived on the street, off and on, for several years — were homeless. And all were waiting for the same thing.

■ **IMPATIENT**, Rideout pulled out his cell phone and a slip of paper, dialing the number on it. “Are you still coming?” he asked after a pause. “She’s stuck in traffic,” he reported a moment later, putting away the phone.

Rideout and the others were waiting for the “potato truck,” something of a legend among Philadelphia’s homeless as a free ride to opportunity — figuratively, anyway. Literally, it represents transportation to a North Carolina potato farm, hundreds of miles from Philadelphia — and by proxy, the men hope, their troubles. According to local lore, the truck has cruised the city’s homeless shelters for more than a decade, coming at the beginning of every summer for the harvest season, hungry for new workers.

Rideout — who grew up in North Philadelphia and, despite a knack for computer and software repair, became homeless

not long after emerging from foster care — said one of the reasons he needed the money was to help support a 2-year-old son (he’s no longer with the mother). “I still have to play my part,” he said.

Nearly two hours went by before a long white passenger van pulled up to the curb. The silence that had settled in among the men was broken; one younger bearded man jogged to the truck with a huge duffel bag, planting a wet kiss on the driver’s cheek and giving her a hug.

The driver, a middle-aged African-American woman, swung open the door and told the men to line up single file, as she began to hand out what appeared to be contracts. Within minutes the men had piled into the van and taken their seats for the seven-hour ride to a farm in Camden County, N.C., among them a hopeful Rideout.

■ **I FIRST HEARD** about the potato truck during an interview for an unrelated story with David Shively, a devoted Christian who runs a “homeless ministry” from his Germantown house that includes his regular Sunday delivery of doughnuts to the homeless. Offhandedly, Shively mentioned the potato truck, saying he suspected the homeless recruits were being exploited on a mysterious farm down South — and that he’d heard the horror stories himself.

Calls to various shelters and advocacy organizations yielded little more than rumors. I began to seek out homeless men who had been to this farm and, slowly, collected the stories of five individuals who had gone and returned.

One night in June, Shively sent a text message: The truck was rumored to be coming

the next morning. It never showed up. But several homeless men who were gathered near the pickup point said it would come at dawn the *next* day. I showed up that following morning to meet Rideout and, it turned out, the potato truck.

Just before the truck departed, I approached driver/recruiter Dolly Moore, who was happy to extol the virtues of her operation. The men, she said, are paid at least minimum wage and get an opportunity to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. “It helps a lot of them stay out of trouble when they get out of the city for a while,” she said, pointing out that she’d seen more than a few move to North Carolina and start families there.

Unprompted, she added: “Not all migrant workers get mistreated.”

Shively’s concerns about exploitation — and Moore’s unprompted denial of it — aren’t without context. In 2007, potato farmer Ronald Evans was sent to federal prison for 30 years for systematically tricking homeless African-American workers into endless debt. Evans, a jury found, had recruited homeless men from big cities like Tampa, Miami and New Orleans, promising them shelter and a job. In fact, the men arrived to find payment for their labor in the form of crack cocaine, also sold on the premises via a “company store” — a term used to describe the under-the-table selling of goods to migrant workers beyond what’s legal to charge money for, i.e. meals. When the men spiraled into debt, they were trapped at the farm and forced to work. During the case, the U.S. Department of Justice described the farmer’s practices as “a form of servitude morally and legally reprehensible.” Evans’ initial defense was that he hadn’t been aware of the crack dealing on his farm.

As migrant worker rights groups see it, the practices of Evans and others like him amount to modern-day slavery — a loaded word, but by no means

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PICKUP POINT: The rescue mission Sunday Breakfast was the spot where several homeless men found the potato truck. PHOTO BY NEAL SANTOS

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➔ a hyperbolic one. While Evans was not charged with slavery per se, another recent case, that of Ramiro and Juan Ramos, contractors who managed a team of 700 farm workers and kept them on the premises with death threats, were successfully prosecuted in 2004 for exactly that: slavery.

Those running the North Carolina farm are quick to deny any such exploitation, presenting the operation as a chance for down-and-out men to pull their lives together.

Before he boarded, I had asked Rideout to observe his surroundings on his summer journey to North Carolina and report back upon his return. What he and several other homeless men found paints a very different picture.

■ **GEORGE WOODS FARMS** comprises more than 2,700 acres of potatoes and is located, as Rideout later put it, in “the middle of nowhere” — at least three miles from the main road. He and four other homeless men who had traveled to the farm gave accounts of life on the farm, many of them jarringly reminiscent of allegations in the Evans case.

The men — some 80 per season, by vari-

ous accounts — are housed in shacks located within walking distance of their work, which consists of stuffing potatoes into sacks from a conveyor belt and stacking the bagged potatoes into boxes that are then fork-lifted onto tractor-trailers. Each day’s work is marked by the sounding of a horn.

Most of the workers, said the men, were “homeless, drug addicted, also dealing with some mental-health issues,” said “Charles,” who asked not to be identified and is now living in a Philadelphia shelter.

“There might be 10 to 15 from Philly, 10 to 15 from Jersey, Baltimore, all the surrounding big cities,” added “John,” another man who asked that his name be withheld, who says he went to the farm after losing his job several years ago. Some of the men who’ve been to the farm describe sleeping on beds. Cedric Ellis, another homeless man who went to the farm, says he slept on a shack floor, with 20 other men.

The work, they all agree, is brutal. Charles said he labored 14-hour days in hot, sticky weather. Rideout described working 11- to 15-hour days on the potato farm, moving 50-pound bags of potatoes. “The work individually isn’t that bad,” he said. “How long we did it? That’s what really got to you.”

For their troubles, most of the workers expected only to be paid North Carolina’s

minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour — though John said he was promised as much as \$10 per hour before he arrived. But the minimum wage, he and all the men interviewed for this story said, proved an elusive goal. Being miles from the nearest road, the bare necessities — especially meals — were hard to come by, and aside from farm-sold food, an apparently informal “company store” maintained on the premises charged exorbitant rates. Other niceties — beer, cigarettes — were astoundingly expensive: “You’ll be sweaty and drink cold beer, but it costs \$7 a bottle down there,” said Ellis. After nearly two months of hard labor, Ellis said he saved only \$160. “It’s designed to keep you broke if you’re weak.”

When workers were low on cash, Ellis said, the “company store” was only too happy to extend credit, which meant some laborers wound up not only poor but actually in debt after weeks of toil in the potato fields — a system that forced workers to keep on working.

“The men know that if they’re in debt, they aren’t allowed to leave until they’ve worked it off,” explained Charles.

George Woods Farms officials and Rideout deny that a “company store” even exists.

And, according to all of the men interviewed, cigarettes and beer weren’t the only luxury items the camp had to offer. A key part of life on the farm, said the men, is drug use.

“IF THEY’RE IN DEBT, THEY AREN’T ALLOWED TO LEAVE.”

Former workers said drugs, notably crack cocaine, were available on the property. Of the five men who talked about their experience, all except Rideout, who found lodging outside the farm, saw rampant drug use there. Four of the men — interviewed independently of one another — claimed that drugs, including crack cocaine, were not only available on the premises but could be purchased, on credit, via the “company store.”

Crack users would wander into crop fields and “smoke their brains out,” described Charles. He said for many the situation was so bad that after a while

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➔ addicts weren't even working for money. "You're working to get crack," he said. "It's like slave labor."

Charles added that "you can even get sex on credit." Prostitutes, he said, would come by on Saturdays, after workers were paid, and collect for those in debt.

Asked whether he considered the situation exploitation or, as was ruled in the Ramos case, slavery, John replied: "Nobody puts a gun to your head."

■ **BOTH** George Woods Farms owner Jimmy Harrell and his labor contractor, Brenda Moore (sister of Dolly Moore), deny accusations of worker mistreatment and illegal activities on the property. Harrell, who serves on the executive committee of the United States Potato Board, sits on the board of directors of the North Carolina Potato

Association and is chairman of the North Carolina Agricultural Finance Authority, says his involvement with the farm workers is indirect and that he has never received a single formal complaint of abuse.

"We try to treat people fairly — they have a nice bed," he said, adding, "I just pay the contractor a flat rate. ... I do know that [Brenda Moore] gets the job done."

Harrell, too, denied there ever was a "company store" on the farm. As for hiring homeless workers, "It's better than the street," he argued.

Moore, who's worked in the potato business since she was a teenager, explained that the litany of allegations levied by the men can be attributed to the management of a former contractor, who she said died in 2000 — though all the men interviewed for this story had been to the farm since 2005. She denied drugs, prostitution and the existence of a "company store."

■ **FOR** the 4,000-some labor camps across North Carolina, the state's Department of Labor has only seven employees inspect-

EXPLOITATION OR SLAVERY? "NOBODY PUTS A GUN TO YOUR HEAD."

ing for working violations, according to Melinda Wiggins, executive director of Student Action with Farmworkers in North Carolina, who is herself the daughter and granddaughter of sharecroppers. She and her team visit labor camps across North Carolina to interview migrant workers and encourage them to stand up for their rights.

They also pressure federal and state authorities to

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HEADED SOUTH: In June, several homeless men boarded this white van headed for a North Carolina farm. PHOTO BY KRISTEN MOSBRUCKER



BETTING THE FARM

➔ crack down on housing and labor violations. Beyond the lack of resources, she says, is a lack of will by federal and state officials whom she says have been heavily influenced by the agriculture lobby. In 2008, the *Charlotte Observer* reported that campaign donors for the Department of Labor commissioner, Cherie K. Berry, had systematically reduced fines for labor law violations for certain companies. The *Observer* investigation found that companies that donated to the commissioners' campaign saw a reduction of 70 percent in their citation fines.

As a result, Wiggins says most companies in North Carolina don't take Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) inspections seriously. "They consider it a cost of doing business; they can just budget to break the law," she says. "We are fighting against a lot of power."

"Our whole agricultural system in this country is based on a system where land owners, agricultural

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BETTING THE FARM

➔ employers and now agribusiness controls every aspect of a worker's life," she says. "It's a situation ripe for abuse."

While federal fines for violations concerning housing and general living conditions at a temporary labor camp are steep, ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000 and up to three years in prison, no such action has ever been taken at the potato farm.

According to North Carolina court records, Brenda Moore was charged in 1995 with "communicating threats" to one Eugene O. Bell. She was found not guilty. She says the whole case was a mistake. Her company was also found in violation of OSHA standards, twice for restricting kitchen access and once for unsafe handling of chemicals on the premises.

Camden County sheriff Tony Perry acknowledged having heard of complaints by farm workers, but said he has never investi-

gated them, adding, somewhat inexplicably, that he had "no jurisdiction" over the farm in the county he polices.

Locally, few in or outside of the homeless services world seem to know about the truck at all. Phone calls to various shelters and homeless advocates yielded few responses.

"Doughnut Man" David Shively, who alerted me to the existence of the potato truck in the first place, says he's seen many men gamble on going down there — and has wired money to North Carolina twice to help men buy return tickets to Philadelphia. He believes they are being exploited.

"It's not right," he says. "I hate to see people get on that truck."

■ **A COUPLE** of weeks ago, I met with Rideout, who had recently come back from the farm. He had a new plaid shirt, new jeans, a new silver necklace and a heart-shaped balloon animal in his hands. "It's for my son," he explained.

Of all the various accounts of life on the

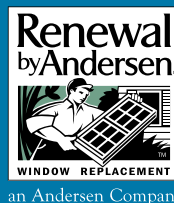
"IT'S NOT RIGHT. I HATE TO SEE PEOPLE GET ON THAT TRUCK."

farm collected for this story, Rideout's was the least dark, possibly because he managed to find lodging outside the camp. After a few months of labor, he managed to make about \$1,500. He stayed away from drugs and out of trouble. Still in his early 20s, he sees the experience as an "adventure."

Rideout is, however, still homeless and out of work. If things don't improve, he said, he plans to be waiting again next June for the potato truck. Maybe, he said, he'll bring his nephew this time.

(editorial@citypaper.net)

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