Roberto Juarez is the vineyard manager at Moulds Family Vineyards in the Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley. He is also curious and eager to expand his knowledge. To better read, write and speak English, he turned to the Napa Valley Farmworker Foundation.

“Today, my career has improved drastically,” says Juarez. “I have the ability to participate in all the meetings with the winemakers and our viticulture advisor.” Juarez is one of up to an estimated 9,000 farmworkers in Napa Valley, comprised increasingly of permanent residents, many with families. It’s estimated that women represent around 30% of the Napa Valley farmworker population.
The Napa Valley Farmworker Foundation (FWF) seeks to invest in and support these individuals as skilled professionals and valued community members.

Paul Goldberg sits on the board of directors for the FWF, where he serves as vice president. He’s also the president of Napa Valley Grapegrowers and director of operations at Bettinelli Vineyards. He says that as the quality of Napa Valley wines increased, area wineries required a year-round, skilled workforce. Previously, workers tended to vineyards seasonally.

“These people were on the ground floor of farming, thousands of eyes on the vineyard,” says Goldberg. Vineyard owners realized it made sense to invest in training for their employees.

A Growing Organization

The FWF was established in 2011 by the Napa Valley Grapegrowers Association.

“We started offering classes on how to create more sustainable farming and leadership practices,” says Goldberg. “That one piece of it changed the way we farm.”

The early classes focused on viticulture practices, like how to identify pests and disease to take preemptive action, and offered leadership guidance on how to cultivate high-quality crews. The latter inspired strong interest, as hundreds of farmworkers enrolled.
Fundraising for expansion proved fruitful. “It was a worthy cause, and people were receptive,” says Goldberg.

With fiscal growth, the organization offered additional training, like English and math literacy courses, with a curriculum and schedule tailored for farmworkers.

FWF has also offered training on equipment and safety, sponsored vineyard walks and field days, Spanish language courses, tips on how to navigate the U.S. school system in conjunction with the Napa Unified School District, and more. There’s also a summer mentorship program for local high school students interested in a career in the wine and vineyard industry.

Juarez has completed nearly all the programs, and he extends the training to his workers.

“They are also benefiting because they have a better environmental site,” says Juarez. “Together, we can avoid accidents, mistakes, and we can do the job appropriately.”

Juarez says that learning English is the most advantageous accomplishment, one that is well worth the effort for gains in his work and personal life. “We have to miss great memories of our family, but in the end, it feels great when we are able to help and support our next generation,” says Juarez. “Also, I feel fantastic when I answer in another language.”
Industry and Community Support

Since the FWF began, it has benefited more than 21,400 farmworkers and their families, provided nearly 3,000 hours of education and raised $6.1 million for education and professional development.

“Many vineyard management companies, growers and wineries give annually, either through raising their paddle at Harvest STOMP in August, or through our endowment and annual giving program,” says Jennifer Putnam, executive director and chief executive officer of Napa Valley Grapegrowers. She says that individual donations and event volunteers are always welcome.

Harvest STOMP, scheduled for Aug. 29, features local cuisine, live music, a live auction and more than 100 Napa wines poured by Napa Valley Grapegrowers. This all benefits the FWF as well as the preservation and promotion of area vineyards.

Another of the foundation’s landmark events, the annual Napa County Pruning Contest, a longstanding tradition of Napa Valley Grapegrowers and Farmworker Foundation, is now in its 19th year. Held recently on Feb. 8 at Beringer Vineyards’s Gamble Ranch, it’s the most prestigious competition for Napa Valley’s vineyard professionals.

Winners in both the men’s and women’s division take home hundreds of dollars, pruning tools, clothing, gift cards and other prizes. Typically, employers match the cash prize, and many pay their participants for the day.
A Part of the Community

Juarez says that the work of the FWF reaches into many aspects of the community.

“It is a program that is focused on teaching us on how to be involved with the community and how to communicate with all the people around us,” says Juarez. “How to be better leaders, not just at work, but with the family and the community as well.”

One of the ways that this connection is honored is the FWF’s annual street fair, Día de la Familia. In its eighth year, the summertime celebration draws thousands of people. Dozens of community groups also share educational, health and consumer services.

There is no cost to farmworkers and their families for any opportunities through the FWF, including programming and events, and Goldberg says that buy-in from the employers means they encourage their teams to take advantage of all that’s offered.

“At work, my bosses are benefited too, because they trust me in all the work that we do together,” says Juarez of his employers, Steve and Betsy Moulds. “They were encouraging me all the time and keep reminding me that they are proud of me. I think that is the key for the success.”

The FWF only serves farm workers employed in Napa Valley, which leaves a gap for the unemployed, migrant workers and those in other wine-producing regions. Goldberg is hopeful that this program will serve as a model for other areas of the agriculture
industry. He says the foundation’s board has heard from other winegrowing regions in search of guidance.

“There's so much buzz about sustainable agriculture,” says Goldberg. “If part of that is not having a discussion about the people who are involved, we are missing a big piece of the puzzle.”

**ALSO FEATURED**

Your Napa Valley Winery Guide, Part Two

The Champions of Underdog Grapes in Napa Valley

Why Oakville's Luxurious Napa Cabernets Still Reign Supreme