The Lake Report

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Back to work, finally

Ivan Dillon, Baraka Allen, Kentroy McGon and Rojay James are in isolation for 14 days after arriving from Jamaica. The workers arrived at Erwin Wiens Farms on Tuesday at midnight. RICHARD HARLEY

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

It's the day before farm workers will arrive at the Wiens farm, after much anticipation about whether they even would be allowed in the country due to COVID-19 border closures.

Farm owner Erwin Wiens is full of anxiety, making sure the living quarters are fixed up for his guys.

He's fixing a water leak with a local handyman, while his wife Dorothy and daughter Jessica give the house a final tidy to make sure it's ready to go for the 14 days of isolation the workers will face as soon as they arrive.

Finally, late Tuesday night, after worries about whether the men would even make the flight, workers Ivan Dillon, Baraka Allen, Kentroy McGon and Rojay James arrive.

When The Lake Report caught up with Wiens Wednesday morning, the sense of relief in the air was palpable. In another 14 days, the work can begin for this year's grape growing season — finally.

"Now I can say to myself, it's OK."

Wiens said his workers, who have been working his farm for years, typically arrive 10 days earlier and now they will be 24 days late starting work for the season.

And Mother Nature doesn't wait. In fact, she was a bit early this year.

Wiens has a house with separate rooms for the workers, and they must follow the government's guidelines on isolation. Which means they can't work for two weeks and they have to stay six feet apart from each other, even in the house.

He said the workers fully understand the situation, and are really just as worried, if not more, than Canadians are about the virus.

"They're aware of what's going on here. They're watching, they're concerned, they're scared. They want you to stay away from them, too," he said.

"They're more worried here than you and I are. We've kind of followed this thing along."

Wiens said he also has three full-time workers, who have been a great help. He trusts his workers to run the farm, even if something happens to him, he said.

Shaw at financial 'breaking point'

Kevin MacLean
Managing Editor

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the Shaw Festival to near the "breaking point" financially and the company has now cancelled all events until after June 30, says executive director and CEO Tim Jennings.

"We continue to work closely with government agencies around the various new programs being put in place and also with our bank, funding agencies and other business partners to do what we can to remain solvent," Jennings said in a news release Monday.

Shaw CEO Tim Jennings. SUPPLIED

"That said, we have stretched our resources nearly to the breaking point and need this outside help

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Town hands out fines to people, businesses

All NOTL parks are closed due to COVID-19. While greenspaces are still open, people should walk, not drive to use them, says the town. RICHARD HARLEY

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Banning farm workers is racial profiling: Brock prof

Richard Harley
The Lake Report

Amid pandemic panic, people and businesses in town have been taking extra measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but a few businesses have been doing so in ways that constitute racial profiling of seasonal farm workers, The Lake Report has learned.

The newspaper has received multiple reports of incidents of profiling and some businesses telling migrant workers they aren't welcome. There also have been several postings on NOTL social media pages both questioning the appearance of migrant workers in town and followup posts defending workers and criticizing those who made comments about workers.

Canadian farm worker Claude Chambers prunes vines at Erwin Wiens Farms. SUPPLIED

Lord Mayor Betty Disero said she had not heard about any mistreatment of farm workers by businesses, but Coun. Erwin Wiens said he is aware of two incidents of racial profiling in town.

Wiens, who employs seasonal workers on his farm, said simply not allowing migrant workers into a store is unacceptable and the solution lies in education – for businesses, the public and farmworkers.

Disero and some prominent business leaders have issued statements on social media cautioning residents not to jump to conclusions when they see a migrant worker in town – and to treat them respectfully.

The profiling incidents all

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Directives for Niagara

Residents are reminded that the following mandatory directives are now in place:

- Stop all gatherings of more than five people (this includes private gatherings of extended family)
- Avoid all outdoor recreational amenities, including parks, playgrounds, beaches and sports fields
- Close all non-essential businesses
- Stay home as much as possible and only leave the house once a week if required
- Self-isolate for 14 days if you have symptoms or have returned to Canada from being outside the country
- Practice physical distancing and wash hands frequently

It's a time to advocate, not discriminate

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happened in late March and early April, long before the main wave of seasonal workers from Mexico and the Caribbean started arriving in Niagara.

Simon Black, an assistant professor of labour studies at Brock University, said the incidents aren't surprising, but that people should know such actions violate Canada's human rights code.

"Migrant farmworkers in Niagara experience racism during times when there's not a pandemic, so the fact that there's racial profiling now in a time of heightened xenophobia and anxiety around a global pandemic is not at all surprising," Black said in an interview Saturday.

"If there are businesses in Niagara-on-the-Lake which are refusing to serve migrant workers, then that is a violation of the entire human rights code. I mean that constitutes racial profiling."

Wiens said people who might be worried should just ask when the workers have arrived. "The same way I would ask questions of anybody, if I saw a deep, deep tan on a friend of mine, I'd be like, 'Hang on a sec, where did that tan come from?'"

"It's a two-fold issue," Wiens said. "One thing is that everybody now, farmworkers included, have to understand social distancing and that we have to work together so that we don't send busloads of guys to the bank or to the Valu-mart."

"But the other thing is understanding that once they've gone through the quarantine or the self-isolation, there is going to be one or two people coming who are going to be getting big orders, because they're going to be getting orders for six or seven guys. So, they're not hoarding. So we have to all work together to understand to do what's best for everybody," he said.

"I'm confident that we can get through all of these things with proper education and proper knowledge," he said.

One source, whom The Lake Report agreed not to name, said she witnessed an incident at an Old Town store two weeks ago, during which an employee tried to enforce what she called a "management policy" that farmworkers couldn't shop in the store. According to the witness, the migrant worker had already been in the country for several weeks and gone through isolation procedures.

That policy has since been rescinded, but the witness called the scene "heartbreaking."

"The employee was trying to write him a letter to give to his employer to let them know that (the) manager had in fact made the decision not to serve any migrant workers," the witness said.

She said the migrant worker didn't speak English, but coincidentally a woman who speaks Spanish was in the store and able to communicate the message to him.

"It ended up being that this person had been back in the country over a month, and had been working and gone through all of the policies and procedures," she said.

The witness called a local grower shortly afterward to express her concerns.

"There needs to be more done on the community's part to protect them if they have gone through all of the self-isolating scenarios. But, I mean, to go into a store, not be able to speak English and be refused service is just terrible."

She said the man, who had a mask on, finally ended up getting served. She hopes other stores in town will not try to implement similar policies that violate human rights out of fear.

"We're all terrified and I get it, but they're choosing to stay open, and if they need to adjust their protocols to be able to serve the public, then do that. Don't just refuse service."

Black said this should be a time to advocate for migrant workers, not a time to divide the community.

"If you look at the importance of migrant workers to the Niagara economy — $1.4 billion I think the GDP impact from agriculture in the Niagara region — without migrant workers there is no agricultural economy in the region, full stop," he said.

"This is a moment in which you have an already vulnerable work force who is coming into the country. You have a federal government and local health authorities which have not adequately planned to provide adequate access to health care for migrant workers in the context of this pandemic," he said.

"So you have a moment in which residents of Niagara and the Niagara-on-the-Lake community could be advocating for these workers who are so central to the well-being of the local economy. And it's unfortunate that some residents have turned — whether through fear or whether just through outright racial bias or discrimination — to engaging in … racially profiling these workers."

He said employers operating farms, greenhouses or wineries should be speaking out on behalf of their workers if they hear about racial discrimination.

"If there are workers who, through the seasonal agricultural worker program, are there on your farm — who are contributing to the local economy, who are essential to your business, then you need to be advocating for them. And if those workers are experiencing racial profiling when they're downtown in Niagara-on-the-Lake, then those employers should be calling the Ontario Human Rights Commission to investigate."

Black said his hope is for people in Niagara to "recognize how essential (migrant) workers are to our local economy."

These workers are vulnerable, he said, and it's not the time to allow "fear to turn us against each other" but instead to "take the time to advocate for these workers who are so essential to that economy, and when these workers experience racial profiling or racism, to call that out amongst our community members."

The witness to the store incident said she'd like to see stores and farmers work together so store employees know if a worker has been through isolation.

She suggested one way for farmworkers perhaps to show they've quarantined is for farmers to provide cards that say, "Yes, I've passed quarantine."

"Put different protocols in place in place as opposed to just saying, 'You're not of whatever variety of person. I'm not serving you,' " she said.

With many snowbirds returning – and several reports of some of them not self-isolationg – it's possible someone who lives in town is visiting stores and spreading the virus.

"There's people that have travelled back from Italy and Spain and Florida and everywhere else to come back to Canada that are walking around, but because they're of this country nobody questions them? That's absolutely ridiculous … Either stay closed or put protocols in place where you can serve the public, and all of the public, not who you deem to not be eligible for service," she said.

She commended the farmers going to great lengths to do shopping for their employees.

Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services (FARMS) has put out information to help employers, Wiens said, "so that we don't have three or four or five guys going to the Avondale."

He said one person should do the shopping for a group of workers on the farm.

"(They need to) go and pick up five phone cards or pick up enough for everybody. We can't have everybody going together because it is a whole new world order right now."

While banning all farmworkers is "not acceptable," Wiens added, "I'm going to give a lot of leeway in these times of stress that people might say inadvertent things or they may misunderstand."

Retail workers are on the front lines and they're going home to families, "so they're concerned too. So we have to work together. We don't want to see people discriminated against but at the same time I understand where the front-line workers are concerned with these things," he said.

Education is essential because "pointing fingers and fighting right now (won't work). We cannot divide," Wiens said. "This is all for one and one for all."

NOTL hockey star drafted to OHL team

Kevin MacLean
Managing Editor

No matter where Niagara-on-the-Lake phenom Tai York's hockey career goes from here, the day he was drafted into the Ontario Hockey League will be one he never forgets.

It was a real family affair.

In anticipation of the Niagara North Stars winger being selected in last Saturday's draft, 15 members of his family – and one dog – gathered in the parking lot near the Walmart at MacLeod Road in Niagara Falls.

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, all social distancing rules were followed. They sat in four vehicles from 9 a.m. until after 1 p.m. when York was chosen, 109th overall, by the Barrie Colts.

For years the OHL's Priority Selection draft of under-16 players has been conducted online. So, York and his relatives stayed in their vehicles, constantly refreshing their phones as teams chose the 300 top young players who will get a crack at playing major junior hockey this fall.

"It was nerve-racking," the 15-year-old left winger said in an interview. "I saw a lot my friends go (in the draft), guys I played against or played with and I was just hoping to see my name."

With dad Justin, mom Susie and brother Austin, 17, all sitting in their truck, everyone was "super excited" when York was selected in the sixth round by Barrie.

The Walmart parking lot was chosen as a central rendezvous point for the festivities so the clan could meet up with Susie's brother, who lives in Welland.

Read the full story online at www.niagaranow.com/news.phtml/3755.

Compassion for Niagara long-term care residents

Jessica Maxwell
The Lake Report

Niagara has bonded together through the crisis of COVID-19 to show support for the community in many ways.

The staff and residents at NOTL's Niagara Long Term Care Residence (formerly Chartwell Niagara) are grateful to have received donations of flowers, coffee, hand sanitizer and gift bags as a show of support.

Niagara LTC Residence's acting executive director Kim Widdicombe says there are "lots" of flowers in the residence now which, "brought a smile to all the residents faces, they loved that."

"Hydrangeas sent by Upper Canada Animal Hospital went all over the home, into residents' rooms and into common areas – dining rooms and lounges," Widdicombe said. "There were a few left over for staff to take and they were thrilled."

Niagara LTC Residence wants to make sure the community knows how much the support it has received is appreciated. Donations have also been made by Tim Hortons, the Watering Can Flower Market, Dillion's Distillery and Prince of Wales Hotel.

Widdicombe said the support is "very heartwarming and it means a lot to our staff and residents."

Read the full story online at www.niagaranow.com/news.phtml/3750