



Jullienne Cabebe, left, and Ali Mouallem stand in the kitchen of writer Omar Mouallem's family business in High Prairie



THE LIVES OF OTHERS

Alberta's economy depends on
TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS.
So why are we making it so hard for them to stay?

BY OMAR MOUALLEM / PHOTOGRAPH BLUEFISH

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hat was the last thing to go through their minds? Before the crash, were they still celebrating Josephine Tamondong's big news that she was granted permanent status in Canada?

The five temporary foreign workers (TFWs) from the Philippines came to Canada to make and save money, send a significant portion of it back home to their relatives and perhaps bring them here to live one day.

In Canada they had no family, but the other contract workers they met at the Coast Edmonton Plaza Hotel, where four of them worked, were close enough to count as one. So in March, when 29-year-old Josephine got her permanent residency, her co-worker Anthony Castillon offered to drive her to Montana so she could re-enter Alberta as a resident rather than wait a few weeks for the official documents to arrive. She decided it was worth the middle-of-the-night drive, and so did Joey Mangonon, Eden Biazon and Josefina Velarde, who tagged along to celebrate and support her. After all, they were all working toward the same dream. >

They were only two hours into their nine-hour road trip when those dreams were crushed. At 11 p.m. on March 5, an alleged drunk driver on Highway 2 slammed his white Range Rover into Castillon's vehicle after driving the wrong way for 20 kilometres. The only survivors were Tyler James Stevens, who faces 14 criminal charges, and Josephine. What should have been one of the best nights of her life became her worst nightmare.

THEY ARE AMONG CANADA'S 46,000 FILIPINO MIGRANT workers – 290,000 total including all nationalities – who in many cases leave their families to support them from afar. A few months before the accident, I had driven north along Highway 2, in the opposite direction of their fateful trip, to meet a community of Filipino TFWs in the remote town of High Prairie where I grew up. Nearly half of Alberta's migrant workers live in towns just like it.

At every pit stop I made along the way, I saw how foreign workers were changing the economic landscape. At a gas station near Athabasca, I met a young woman from the Philippines named Christina, who was supporting her parents. In a Slave Lake pizzeria, I met Fernando, another Filipino, who worked the oven with his brother. He'd been in Canada two months and was already hoping his employer, clearly within earshot, would nominate him to stay permanently.

An hour later, I pulled into the parking lot of my brother Ali's restaurant and, as I'd done a thousand times before, growing up when my father was running it, I entered through the back door and walked right into the kitchen.

But this time, it was almost unrecognizable. Two Filipino men worked alongside Ali, kneading dough and stacking patties. The kitchen I grew up in was a family operation, with my dad, mom and brother on the grills and little me standing on a milk crate and serving orders from the drive-thru window.

My dad, a Lebanese immigrant, was devoted to that place. He usually got one break a day – a few hours between the dinner rush and closing – and staffed the kitchen with family out of necessity. Cooks came and went, and sometimes lived in our basement for free, but he seldom found one he could depend on, the kind who would show up on time or at least not steal booze from the storage room. That's why, by the time my older brother could weigh a steak, he was being groomed to run the family business.

In 2007, the year Ali took over, the Philippines surpassed the U.S. as our nation's main source of foreign workers. This wasn't some freak phenomenon, either. Canada's immigrants are coming in ever-increasing numbers from southeast and south Asian countries like India, which sends seven times more TFWs per year than it did a decade ago. In fact, in recent years, Canada has been welcoming more temporary residents than permanent ones, and it first occurred in Alberta, where one in five foreign workers (compared to only one in ten Canadians) live.

What started in the 1960s as a treaty-sanctioned program to welcome seasonal farmhands and evolved over the next decade to include highly skilled workers and live-in caregivers with built-in paths to residency became a revolving door of low- and unskilled workers. Confronting a national labour shortage, Jean Chrétien's Liberals extended the welcome mat in 2002, and the number of guest workers soared from 101,000 to 248,660 by 2011. Under these new terms, the program was no longer restricted to elite employees with unique skill sets and the live-in caregivers that have always been in demand. Suddenly, someone like my brother could hire dependable, hard-working migrant workers, who were usually willing to do the work for a few bucks less than the locals. And so, Ali did.

Today's migrant workers are pouring your double-doubles and wrapping your double cheeseburgers, even if it says "skilled" on their work permits. And although these one-year contracts say they can only work one job, often they work a second under the table. Permits that aren't "open," which is most of them, dictate where they can work, for whom they can work and what work they can do. A second document, obtained by the employer, gives a labour market opinion (LMO) of the minimum wage someone in that specific city, doing that specific job, can be paid.

The problem – one of them, at least – is that many of these people aren't doing the job that's on their work permit. They're doing something else for an LMO that's dollars below what it would be if their employer was honest on the forms. But workers are often fine with that. After all, they came to make and save more money than they would at home and perhaps send a significant portion of that extra money back to relatives. That's priority number one for virtually all TFWs. Number two? As I learned on a trip I took back to High Prairie, it's finding a way to stay – forever.

WHEN BOXING PHENOM MANNY PACQUIAO FIGHTS, THERE'S NO BETTER PLACE IN northern Alberta to watch the bout than the house that Jullienne Cabebe shares with his girlfriend, Genalyn Balbin, their puppy and four other TFWs. On fight night, the kitchen table is covered with beer and barbecued skewers and the living room fills up with 20 men and women from the otherwise shrinking town's swelling Filipino community. They've all come to watch their national hero – probably the greatest pound-for-pound fighter alive – trade punches with some unfortunate opponent.

I learned about Cabebe's parties from Ali, who employs him as a cook. When I paid Cabebe a visit, I was greeted by a feast and a small crowd of eight Filipino TFWs, and I wondered briefly if I had forgotten about a Pacquiao fight that was taking place. Instead, the party was a response to Cabebe's open call for TFWs who wanted to speak to me, someone from the media, about living and working in limbo. Through the course of the night, another five would join us after they finished work, including Thierry Pichay and his younger brother Wintoun.

Thierry and Wintoun both left the Philippines in 1990. Thierry, 42, bucked the last semester of his computer programming degree for a job in High Prairie nannying his aunt's children. His brother skipped out on the last year of his degree for a more cosmopolitan life in Bonn, Germany.

They both started as TFWs: Thierry, a live-in caregiver on a two-year path to permanent residency, and Wintoun, a McDonald's cook who got his German residency in due time. Both eventually became citizens, got married and had a kid. But by 2004, their lives had headed in very different directions. Thierry owned a cleaning company and was thriving, while Wintoun was still at McDonald's. He had worked his way up to management, only to be fired by incoming owners who swept out the relatively privileged older workers for lower-paid and benefit-free new ones.

"How come my brother is in High Prairie," Wintoun asked rhetorically, "and he's been more successful than me?"

In 2006, he took his family to visit Thierry in his brother's Canadian town of three traffic lights. When they arrived, his brother told him that his family might be able to stay through the migrant worker program. "My ex-wife's sister at A&W told me they were hiring people from the Philippines," said Thierry, who was asked by the restaurant to recruit foreign workers and administrate their papers. "I experimented on Genalyn and my brother."

And, just like that, Thierry's brother and sister-in-law from Germany and Balbin, his ex-wife's cousin from the Philippines, moved to become TFWs in Canada's fast-food industry. This also led to Thierry developing a sideline as a recruiter. In five years, he has helped employers across Canada hire more than 100 guest workers, many from his hometown of Vigan. "It's like I'm in the Philippines," Wintoun remarked.

Wintoun is a manager again, and he's quite happy with making \$17 an hour – up \$5 from when he started. But that second priority, permanent residency, seems to be out of reach. His employer tried to nominate him through the Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program but was told that Wintoun didn't meet one of the requirements, a degree. Then, Wintoun applied for his wife and son in the family stream, but he was rejected because he scored a seven out of 10 on the English exam; the minimum for someone without a degree is eight.

And, because of an amendment made to the foreign worker program last year, ▶

his family may not get to stay much longer. As of April 1, 2011, TFWs must leave Canada after four work years and can't return again for another four unless they get the elusive permanent residency. That's difficult if you're not eligible for the Canadian Experience Class, a fast-track program for graduate students or in-demand professionals.

I asked him how he felt, knowing that he was running out of time, but to my surprise he didn't appear to know that he was. "Even for skilled workers?" he asked Cabebe.

"Yeah," he said.

No one had notified Wintoun until then, in November, that the race was on. And he was eight months late.

THE ROADBLOCKS THAT STAND BETWEEN WINTOUN AND PERMANENT RESIDENCY are no more imposing than the ones facing Genalyn Balbin. Take her newly minted open permit, which is as puzzling as it is rewarding. In order to get it, her common-law partner, Cabebe, had to be a "skilled" worker like her. After my brother promoted him from kitchen aid to cook they were eligible, but one had to sponsor the other. That meant only one of them could have the privilege to work without a specific employer, town and title on their permits.

Balbin, a 28-year-old nursing graduate who "came for a greener pasture," now balances her full-time job at A&W with a better-paying second job at the hospital, where she's a nursing aid for an additional 30 hours a week. Because her degree doesn't qualify her to be a nurse in Canada, "aid" is her highest aspiration. As such, she can feed a patient but she can't give him medicine, and since "open" only refers to work she can't upgrade her education to the point where she could do more. But, she still calls herself lucky.

Balbin came to Canada in order to provide for family abroad. In the Philippines, five people depend on her. Like most TFWs, she makes nearly 10 times more a month in Canada than she would at home. But the cost of living here is high, so the money she has left to send to her family – a third to a half of her income – sometimes isn't enough. Two of the men I met, including Cabebe, blamed the end of their marriages to women living in the Philippines on their spouses' unrealistic financial expectations and, to a lesser extent, distance.

Even if you're single, like 25-year-old Chester Rosario, life as a TFW in Canada isn't exactly easy. After spending two exhausting years in a Taiwanese computer factory he came to High Prairie for a more lucrative and less laborious job as a cashier. But when he arrived at the ATV shop where he was to work, he was given a mechanic's duties – at a cashier's rate. The first time Rosario complained to his higher-ups, he learned a painful truth about life for many of Canada's TFWs: "They said to me I'm just a contract worker and they're my employer. They give orders and us contract workers should just follow them."

That wasn't the worst of it. He says his boss made him do all kinds of unrelated work like repairing the electrical wiring on his store, cutting his lawn and, once, shingling the roof of the apartment building he owned. "He just commanded me: 'Tomorrow, we will be working at the apartment,'" Rosario says. "When I arrived, he gave me a shovel and said, 'Take all the shingles [off the roof] and we will put on new ones.' No please at all. He didn't say, 'Can you help me?' or 'Can we do this?' No. Just 'Do this.'"

Rosario's story isn't unusual. Throughout the night I heard stories of blackmail, false promises and jacked-up rents by employers who doubled as landlords. Other TFWs said they had to pay their bosses an illegal premium to refund what the employers saw as expensive starting wages on the labour market opinion given by the government.

To my surprise, I didn't hear about recruiters charging illegal fees to bring them into the country, which is, in fact, the second most common complaint heard by the Alberta Federation of Labour. Yessy Byl of the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre volunteered to be the federation's foreign worker advocate in 2006. She says some recruiters are breaking Alberta's Fair Trading Act and charging TFWs anywhere

from \$3,000 to \$10,000 to help them come to Canada or find a new job once they're here. But the most common complaint she heard dealt with wages and working conditions, which is why she and the AFL recommended in 2007 that the federal program be halted and overhauled.

Foreign workers, of course, don't want that. But there are changes they do want to see. "I just hope they will treat us the way they treat Canadians," grocery stocker Rey Judilla told me.

DURING OUR INTERVIEW, WINTOUN POLLED THE ROOM: "WHAT are we after?"

As if it were a call-and-response protest, virtually everyone in the room said, "Permanent residency."

Wintoun continued. "It's like they [the government] only use us. OK, we took advantage of that chance to come here. They gave us the go signal: 'We need workers. You want to come? Go in.' But then, in the long run, we're used to living here. It's like our home now.

"Our plan is to live our lives and be successful," he said. "That means if we invest our savings, we buy a house. Now wouldn't that be good for Canada's economy?"

It's difficult to say what's good for the economy. It's true that when workers send half of their income abroad, that's money unspent in Canada. But creating a revolving door that replaces foreigners every four years might just aggravate the issue by interfering with their ability to put down roots and eventually bring those families – and those dollars – here to stay.

"We are not treating them as people anymore," Byl says. "They are commodities."

It seems the only people benefitting unconditionally from the program are business owners. According to Statistics Canada, foreign workers make significantly less than their Canadian counterparts. They help keep wages low. And yet, they face unique challenges – intimidation, isolation and exploitation – that leave them vulnerable because the existing complaint-driven system is useless to a workforce that's too afraid to complain about work situations out of fear that if they do, they'll be left unemployed until they're broke and have to return home.

In March, the Alberta government announced plans to crack down on illegal recruitment premiums. Still, it lags behind what Manitoba has done to protect TFWs from unscrupulous employers and to explore ways to make both permanent residency and immigration more realistic. In 2009, Manitoba passed the Worker Recruitment and Protection Act to, in part, prevent companies and work agencies from exploiting TFWs. It hits employers who contravene the act with fines ranging from \$25,000 to \$50,000 per violation. But until a similar model is adopted on a national level, the vast majority of migrant workers are labouring in much more precarious situations. People like Wintoun.

Although he speaks better English than my dad and has three more years of college, gambling on his odds of obtaining permanent residency would be like betting on traffic lights. Still, upon landing in this country, their dreams were no different. They uprooted themselves from the second world to try and thrive in the first, starting near the bottom, in restaurants. Wintoun said he'd be OK with that if it meant he could stay. But my dad was given citizenship after five years and the opportunity to buy a home, purchase land, start a business and pass that all to his children, who have an even better life. My brother and I have both enjoyed the advantages associated with growing up as Canadian citizens. Will the same be true for Wintoun's children? **AV**

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– Yessy Byl, Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre