

Farmer: Jesus Echeverria

Interviewer: L Kravit-Smith

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Jesus Echeverria started farming in Shelton, Washington 8 years before I was born in Guatemala. Way before I was adopted and came to Olympia, Washington, Jesus became one of the first Latinx folks to migrate to Shelton. Many years apart, yet through my interview I discovered that we both have a connection to my homeland.

Jesus started farming when he was three years old with his father in Mexico. During our interview he shared with me a little of his migration story. I was deeply appreciative to be able to witness him talking about a very emotional experience. Being from Guatemala, migration is prevalent in my life and is constantly weighing on my mind. He and 6 others (including his wife - who he met when he was 12!) walked for 9 days through the desert in Texas. He told me that it was supposed to be a four day walk, but due to lack of sunshine, they got lost. Jesus says "When you can see the sun and you can see where you're going. You can see north and south. When the sun gets covered up with the clouds, you can't see and we didn't know where we were". He arrived in Shelton in 1974. Shelton is now known for its Latinx population, but when Jesus came, he was one of the only Latinos in town. It was hard to imagine being in a place with little to no people who looked like you. My experience in Olympia as a brown person has been one of isolation, but when I came to this country at least there were other people who looked like me already in my adopted land. He told me about the lack of respect and the racism that he felt from the community. Jesus and his wife would go to the store and when people would hear them speak Spanish, they would tell them to speak English. Ironically in Shelton now the stores are full of mainly Latinx spanish speakers. He explains that "people were really mean to Latinos. They would call the police because Latinos were outside in a parking lot or in the store. Well, a friend of mine went to Olympia and he bought a hat up there and then came to Shelton, went to the store and someone said he stole the hat from the store. So they called the police and he had proof that it was purchased in his pocket". This story made me think about the many times that I have been accused of stealing from stores, while my white friends would never get profiled.

Now, Jesus has a farm in Shelton called Rancho Durango, which he started in 1992. He has cows, pigs, chickens and many other animals. The farm uses equipment from tractors to stock trailers. It struck me that we both had a connection to my homeland of Guatemala. Jesus told me that most of his customers are people from Guatemala, 95% of my customers are Guatemalan, 5% are Mexican, 1% are white. He says "so I've got 101% I guess!". When he mentioned the amount of Guatemalans he has in his community, I felt excited to be making this new connection. He also does a community rodeo! It is a side part of the farm, but it is incredibly

impactful. It is a huge get-together and they even get people from all over the area, some from over three hours away. It is a community fundraiser and they get different nonprofit organizations involved. The profit goes to those different organizations. And they allow them to have booths at the rodeo to fundraise for their organization, it has become a vital community recourse. They mostly work with the church, senior center, fire department and schools. This was such a powerful example of mutual aid and it made me consider all the ways that farming can create these community support ties.

Jesus has had a long career in farming. And he passes down his knowledge to his family. They all get together on the farm, he has 6 daughters and 15 grandchildren. All of his kids have learned to be farmers. They learned how to deal with the animals just as Jesus' dad and his grandpa showed Jesus in his early years. I found this to be a beautiful image. The passing down of ancestral skills and torches. I was curious about the ways that planting is different in Washington versus Mexico. He then went on to tell me about the different methods of corn production. He said “well, in Mexico I used to plant corn with a mule and with a plow. The mule would pull the plow to make a hole and then we would pump the corn into the hole. And then you will cover it up with the plow. Now in Washington, we're using a pipe. You put a pipe down, and you put the corn inside the pipe. And then you pull the pipe up and the corn goes in the ground”. Corn is a vital source of food in Latin America. And in many places, including Guatemala and Mexico it's seen in an almost godly light. It has been used for many generations for communicating with ancestors and also as a nutrient dense food source. When he and his family are not farming, they like to have a lot of fun. His birthday is on St. Patrick's Day - March 17. His kids plan to throw him a big party. Where they will have mariachi, music and dancing.

Throughout talking to Jesus, it was inspiring to hear his story and his strength when it came to his legacy in farming. Being from Guatemala, it was exciting to hear about how many of his customers are coming from there. His farm and their rodeo event has made a lasting impact on the community and it seems that many people are excited about what it could bring to Shelton. I hope to go to his rodeo and farm someday and I feel honored to have been able to interview him.