



NEW BLOOMINGTON — Hours before dawn on Dec. 17, a line of vehicles filled the Oakridge Estates trailer park’s main road in rural Marion County, and 100 law enforcement officers began taking positions outside 16 trailers.

Maj. Jay McDonald, who was supervising Marion Police Department officers in the operation, estimated there were 50 state and federal agents and an equal number of local law enforcement personnel, including every detective in the city and county.

“We pretty much occupied every inch of that roadway out there in the trailer park,” McDonald said.

For many of those held in the trailers, it was the end of months or years of being used essentially as slaves. Many worked at a nearby egg farm, where court documents say they moved, vaccinated and debeaked chickens and cleaned coops for 12-hour shifts, six if not seven days a week.

While they were paid, their money was taken by their handlers for rent, expenses and repayment of being smuggled into the country. If the workers — some who were as young as 14 or 15 — complained, they were forced to live in a desolate shack or were threatened with violence against them or their families.

In their first interview since the operation’s ringleader pleaded guilty, local authorities provided exclusive details to the Marion Star about the raid that liberated young Guatemalan men from the labor trafficking scheme.

December raid

The raid had two objectives: Arrest suspects in a forced-labor ring and free the workers they had confined. It was one of the last steps in a multiagency federal investigation into human trafficking that had been building for years.

It led to Oakridge Estates, a park with about 200 trailers on Marion Agosta Road roughly a half mile east of New Bloomington.

About 4:30 a.m., the entry teams identified themselves and yelled, “Search warrant.” FBI interpreters repeated the call in Spanish. Then they made entry.

When Marion County Sheriff’s Office Lt. Christy Utley went into a two-bedroom trailer, there were seven people living there.

“I’ve seen worse,” Utley said. “For the most part, they weren’t filthy, dirty houses. There were roaches in there. It wasn’t cluttered.”

At the back of the park, Marion police Lt. Chris Adkins entered a trailer and found a mix of children and adults inside, although he couldn’t say exactly how many.

Court records said at least one trailer had “no bed, no heat, no hot water, no working toilets and vermin.”

The trailer’s condition didn’t appear to be caused by neglect, either — a worker who complained was moved into that trailer and told to work so his father wouldn’t be killed. That was just one of several threats of violence the workers received.

Other trailers searched were in normal condition, Adkins said.

The raid took minutes, and then local law enforcement officials stood guard outside while federal agents collected evidence.



Castillo-Serrano
(Photo: Submitted photo)

An estimated 45 people were taken from the trailers and considered victims, while at least six people would be indicted in federal court. Four, including leader Aroldo Castillo-Serrano, have already pleaded guilty.

Sheriff Tim Bailey said he wasn’t surprised by the investigation, as there had been a number of migrant workers in Marion County who had entered the U.S. illegally, at least before the recession.

“(Human trafficking and forced labor) is something we watch for, but it’s something difficult to detect because people forced into labor aren’t really readily willing to ... cooperate, tell us and give information,” Bailey said.

Travis and Sharon Jones, two Colorado residents who bought the trailer park in 2014, could not be reached for comment.

The black ledger

On Jan. 28, 2013, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents interviewed two Guatemalan migrants who said they'd been brought to the U.S. two years earlier without legal authorization.

One of the men said he was forced to work off the debt incurred when he was smuggled into the country. He said once he was in the U.S., he worked at a Marseilles egg farm and had to live in a trailer owned by Castillo-Serrano.

Each week, he turned over a \$500 paycheck so Castillo-Serrano could take \$170 for rent and \$200 for utilities and food, plus a portion to pay his debt.

When it was over, he was left with \$20 a week to keep for himself.

The man told the agents that Castillo-Serrano kept a ledger of records for all his workers to ensure they were paying him.

“(He) described the book as having a black cover and that it has a picture of A.C. (Castillo-Serrano) on the front cover,” wrote FBI Special Agent Derek Kleinmann in a criminal complaint.

The other man interviewed by ICE said he'd been brought to the U.S. at the same time, and his family surrendered a land deed to their farm to ensure passage. Upon reaching Marion, he was forced to pay \$230 in rent to live in a trailer with several others, and he worked to pay off his \$15,000 debt.

Court records provide details about some aspects of the operation and a few victim statements, although not all elements of the conspiracy and resulting investigation have been released.

When the federal immigration agents interviewed the pair of laborers in January 2013, court records suggest many of the eventual victims of the alleged labor trafficking — or at least the ones described in the court records — had yet to be recruited.

Castillo-Serrano left for Guatemala in March 2013, turning operations over to Ana Angelica Pedro Juan and other associates assisting in paycheck collection and transportation, according to court records.

The workers were traveling to egg farms owned by Trillium Farms, which had a contract with Haba Corporate Services to provide farm labor. Haba in turn contracted with Rabbit Cleaning Services Inc. and Papagos Inc. All three companies were owned by associates of Castillo-Serrano who have been indicted.

Trillium Farms, through an outside spokesperson, said it was unaware that Haba had contracted the labor to migrant workers who were in the U.S. illegally and were being forced to work until federal authorities contacted them before the December 2014 raid. Once notified, officials said, they helped federal agents identify and rescue the workers.

Federal officials declined to comment on Trillium Farms' role in the investigation.

The sons of Aldea Yulconop

Many of the farm workers recruited by Castillo-Serrano came from the village of Aldea Yulconop, in Guatemala's impoverished Huehuetenango department, which is similar to a state or province.

Most had been born at the tail end of, or immediately after, Guatemala's 36-year civil war, and they were lucky to have made it.

Much of the war was fought between the Guatemalan government and guerrilla forces in the northern highlands areas, including Huehuetenango, and at least 200,000 people were killed or forcibly disappeared. After the war's end in 1996, the United Nations classified some of the killings as acts of genocide.

As a nation, Guatemala has since seen high amounts of gang violence and corruption, said Adriana Beltrán, a senior associate specializing in human rights and organized crime in Guatemala for the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights group.

While Guatemala is a rich country, Beltrán said many communities in Huehuetenango lack electricity and running water or aid from the national government. During the war, the army and paramilitaries killed entire villages and burned the homes to the ground there.

Amid the poverty and desperation, the federal investigation found that Castillo-Serrano amassed substantial power and wealth in the region. In 2014, he began heavily recruiting children to come to the U.S., charging them \$15,000 or more for transportation and taking deeds to their families' farms.

At least seven minors were recruited by Castillo-Serrano from April to June 2014. That came during a massive influx of youth fleeing violence in Guatemala by coming to the U.S. border alone and at great risk.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection records show the number of unaccompanied minors from Guatemala encountered by federal agents doubled each fiscal year from 2011 to 2014, finally reaching 17,057.

Castillo-Serrano regained access to at least four of the teen workers by having an associate represent himself as a family friend to gain custody from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, according to court records. In the fall of 2014, they were then brought to the trailer park, where he forced them to work the same 12-hour shifts as his adult workers.



A car passes by the Oakridge Estates trailer park.
(Photo: Matthew Hatcher/The Marion Star)

While Castillo-Serrano was expanding his work force, in the belief that children would be better workers and easier to control — according to his indictment — federal authorities had begun surveillance of his operation.

Sheriff's office Lt. Christy Utley said that in September or October 2014, investigators began trailing a van used to transport workers to and from the egg farm, noting how many people entered and exited.

Court records provide a limited view of some of this surveillance, specifically a few events in the days before the raid.

On Dec. 4, an FBI agent watched the van as it dropped off at least 10 Hispanic males at Oakridge Estates. Some of the people appeared to be juveniles.

The following morning, the agent trailed a different van picking up workers between 5:14 a.m. and 5:43 a.m., and it dropped them off at an egg farm in Marseilles in Wyandot County.

In less than two weeks, law enforcement officials descended on the trailer park and freed the workers.

Indictments returned

In mid-January, an initial federal indictment was returned against Castillo-Serrano and his associate, Conrado Salgado Soto, on two counts of inducing migrant workers to enter the U.S. illegally for commercial benefit. Salgado Soto also was charged with transporting migrant workers who'd entered the U.S. illegally.

In February, an indictment was returned against driver Bartolo Dominguez, who pleaded guilty June 29. Fellow driver Conrado Ulises Salgado-Borban waived an indictment and immediately pleaded guilty Feb. 26.

Both pleaded guilty to one count of trafficking and harboring aliens.

Jeremy Levy, a Toledo attorney representing Dominguez, said his client was unaware he was breaking the law and was working for Castillo-Serrano and his associates to provide for his family.

"Unfortunately, my client was just a cog in a very large wheel," Levy said this week.

Levy did not comment on statements made by a witness in the court documents that said Dominguez knew the workers were in the U.S. illegally, or whether he knew of the conditions they lived in.

Dominguez will be sentenced in October, while Salgado-Borban was sentenced to time served and deported July 1. A call to his attorney was not returned.

On July 2, a 15-count federal indictment was returned against Castillo-Serrano, Pedro Juan, Salgado Soto and Juan Pablo Duran Jr., a driver with limited other alleged involvement, according to court records. Salgado Soto pleaded guilty Aug. 5, while Castillo-Serrano pleaded guilty Aug. 24. Trials against Pedro Juan and Duran Jr. are ongoing.

Calls to attorneys for the four were not returned.

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While Oakridge Estates appeared tranquil this past week, it was the scene of a Dec. 17, 2014, federal immigration raid, where law enforcement personnel removed 45 people in connection with labor trafficking at area egg farms.

(Photo: Matthew Hatcher/The Marion Star)

Years of labor

The following is a timeline of the alleged crimes.

January 2011: Ringleader Aroldo Rigoberto Castillo-Serrano recruits the first victim identified in court records, a young man in his early 20s from Guatemala. The man's mother offers her land deed as collateral to pay for the \$15,000 charge of smuggling the young man into America, which he repays by working.

Oct. 20, 2011: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations department first learns that foreign nationals are being smuggled into the U.S. to perform work at an Ohio egg farm.

March 2013: Castillo-Serrano returns to Guatemala and Ana Angelica Pedro Juan takes over the Ohio operation, collecting wages from the young men.

March 2014: The conspirators decide to target minors, believing they would be easier to sneak into the country, be harder workers and easier to control.

Summer 2014: Castillo-Serrano has at least one associate lie to federal officials, saying he was the boys' family friend, on forms needed to stay in the country.

Fall 2014: Some of the boys challenge their captors. One complains about conditions in the trailer and is moved to one without heat or running water. Another asks for money for his sick mother but is denied.

October 6, 2014: A man tells federal officials his nephew is being forced into manual labor in Marion County. This leads to several interviews and a covert operation, following the boys to work.

Dec. 17, 2014: Federal and local law enforcement officials raid the trailers at Oakridge Estates, removing 45 people who are taken to a Wooster hotel.

July 2, 2015: Federal officials unseal an indictment accusing Castillo-Serrano, Pedro Juan and others of human trafficking in central Ohio.

Source: Federal and local court records, FBI press releases

Key players

The ringleader: Aroldo Rigoberto Castillo-Serrano, 33, of Guatemala:

Castillo-Serrano orchestrated a massive labor trafficking operation that took boys from their homes in Latin America and forced them into hours of rigorous, manual work on chicken farms in north central Ohio. Castillo-Serrano, who lived in the U.S. illegally for years, would obtain deeds to the homes of the victim's families as collateral while promising them a better life and education for their children in the U.S. A victim's mother described Castillo-Serrano as a rich and powerful man in Guatemala.

The manager: Ana Angelica Pedro Juan, 22, of Guatemala:

Pedro Juan is accused of overseeing the labor operation while Castillo-Serrano was in Guatemala. She allegedly collected the boys' checks, giving them only a small fraction of their wages. She reportedly struck a child who did not want to hand over his wages.

The contractors: Juan Pablo Duran Jr., 23, of Marysville and Conrado Salgado Soto, 52, of Mexico:

Duran and Soto contracted with Trillium Farms, an egg farm with multiple locations in central Ohio. Their companies allegedly provided illegal labor to the egg farms, whose staffs say they only learned about the misconduct in December 2014.

The drivers: Bartolo Dominguez, 55, and Conrado Salgado-Borban, 30:

Witnesses said both Dominguez and Salgado-Borban were aware they were in the U.S. illegally, and Salgado-Borban admitted he knew this while being interviewed. Dominguez also owned a company that contracted with Duran and Soto.

The trailer park: Oakridge Estates, 6605 Marion-Agosta Road:

Oakridge Estates is a mobile home park with dozens of individual trailers where the workers lived while working at the egg farms. At times, trailers had no heat or running water and were infested with roaches.

The egg farms: Trillium Farms

A multilocation egg farm where the boys worked for long hours doing hard labor such as removing the beaks of chickens and cleaning their coops. Company officials say they immediately dropped the subcontractor providing illegal labor when they learned about the FBI investigation in December 2014.

The defendants' companies: Papagos Inc., Haba Corporate Services, Second Generation Farms and Rabbit Cleaning Services. Defendants created these companies to contract with Trillium Farms or one another to perpetrate the illegal labor trafficking scheme.

Source: Federal court records, FBI press releases