

Galvez, Marta: We Can Outlast ^[1]

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Marta Galvez: We Can Outlast

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 9/12/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I talked with Marta Galvez at her home in Morganton, a small city in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I remembered Morganton as a quiet furniture-making town, the sort of place that didn't seem to have much traffic with the outside world.

That day I discovered a different Morganton. I heard a marimba beat coming from a laundromat jukebox and the rhythms of Mayan languages in the streets. And I saw women dressed in huipiles, the breathtakingly colorful handmade blouses worn by the indigenous people of Guatemala.

Senora Galvez introduced me to the history of this Guatemalan community. At the center of her story, I found Case Farms, a poultry slaughterhouse that first recruited Guatemalans to Morganton. The company offered her countrymen a welcome asylum from a brutal civil war but also led them into confrontation with a poultry industry notorious for its toll on body and spirit.

Galvez was among the Guatemalan leaders who showed great courage in demanding reforms through a union organizing campaign at Case Farms. Her words revealed a proud heritage of resistance when faced with hardship and injustice. It is a part of the Guatemalan people's history, and now it is also a part of North Carolina history.

In Marta Galvez's words:



Marta Galvez. Photo by Chuck Liddy, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

My name is Marta Olivia Galvez. I am from the capital of Guatemala. I was born in 1944. We lived very poor. We didn't even have a house. We rented a shack made of cardboard and wood.

When you are a child, you are just happy to be with your mother and have food every day. We ate tortillas and beans like most Guatemalans. But we didn't always have food every day. Only my mother worked, and I had three brothers. My happiest memories of childhood were in the afternoons, because we only went to school a half day. After I did my work we'd go and play in the streets. I had a lot of responsibilities, but on Saturday and Sunday I liked to play basketball. I liked to play basketball. Childhood ended when I was 12 years old. At that point, I had to help my mother out. I would sell just about anything in the markets. Anything I could buy cheap, I would take and sell at a higher price.

In the earthquake in 1976, there was a landslide that basically covered my neighborhood. My neighborhood was at the bottom of a hill, sort of in a valley. A lot of people died and the houses were destroyed. Above the valley, there was a flat place. We made shelters with sheets and pieces of plastic. When they told us we had to leave, me and one of my neighbors said, "Let's form a committee to fight for our houses and our little settlement."

We had all known each other since we were little kids, and they voted for me as the leader. We organized and asked the government to sell us this land. We lived four years there, and we struggled with the government. We won. We improved our lives. I left Guatemala in 1989 because of the guerrillas. I had to defend my life. I came from Guatemala to Mexico, and from Mexico here. It was a hard thing to come here. There were days I did not eat. I came to Morganton in a van which brought me here. The van took us directly to Case Farms. At the beginning, there were not that many Hispanics. It wasn't so hard. I was happy because I had a job where I was going to work every week. Then, when more Hispanics came, they started to treat us differently. At Case Farms there are maybe 20 Mexican workers, some whites and some blacks, but there are hundreds from Guatemala. The first came from San Miguel Acatan. Then came those from Aguacatan. After that, people came from Totonaca. I was worried when I first walked in the factory. I was scared I couldn't do this work, but I could. And I did. There are a lot of people, when they see the chickens go by so quickly, they get dizzy and they leave right away.

The hardest jobs are where they kill the chickens, then evisceration, and then when you have to cut off the pieces with a big knife. The workers get sick a lot. The most common is to have hand and wrist problems, because you are going, going, going. We didn't get one paid break. They didn't even give us time to go to the bathroom. Sometimes people couldn't stand it and they would just up and run to the bathroom. Many times, they would get fired.

That was bad, but the worst was when they started taking our punch cards and giving us 5 or 10 less minutes than we had actually worked. We said this wasn't fair! That's when we stopped the line.

We did that stoppage in the cafeteria. They rang the bell for us to go back to work, and we didn't go. Case Farms called the police, and they took a lot of us away in handcuffs.

Again, in 1995, we made another strike, a very big one. The work line was moving so fast. We made a strike for nine days, in the sun, the rain. Our strike did not solve anything, so we decided that we needed a union. A union came that same year. I miss the neighborhood where I grew up, but I am very grateful to be here. There is peace, tranquility in this place. This is like a paradise compared to Guatemala. In Guatemala to form a union is not something that you can do. They will kill you. In Guatemala we also worked really hard. We worked hard and we had nothing, always. For generations. It's always been like that: working hard and getting nothing. It was not like we worked hard so we could get ahead, or we worked hard for nothing. Here, we say, for example, "need new shoes." Well, then, on Sunday I go to a yard sale and I buy one or two pairs of shoes. Used shoes, but shoes. It's not like that in Guatemala. In Guatemala if you don't have shoes, you don't have shoes.

The Guatemalan people - we resist, we stand up. We can outlast. We can survive. And we are hard workers. We are used to working in Guatemala, but we are not used to being abused.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[Audio Recording](#) ^[5]: Interview with Marta Galvez by Leon Fink, 1 June 1997, K-0955, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/14051> ^[5]

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