

THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE

A boss's view: Keep them working

Pagan from 9XX

First impression

Pagan remembers the day he came to work. He had never seen anything like the Greenville chicken plant, known locally as Columbia Farms. It was almost the size of a soccer field.

Inside the plant, hundreds of Latinos stood inches apart, wielding knives, cutting up thousands of chickens a shift.

It was cold, wet and noisy. Workers wore earplugs to protect their hearing from the clanking conveyor belts.

Pagan, then 47, and Lydia Torres, 34, had left Puerto Rico, where they were U.S. citizens, to “*echarse adelante*” – a Spanish phrase meaning to succeed and get ahead. The couple moved to Buffalo, but after working odd jobs for a few years relocated to Greenville, where a Honduran friend told them the climate was warm and jobs were plentiful.

They were among the growing number of Latinos who found work in poultry plants throughout the Southeast, usually in the most dangerous jobs for the lowest pay.

Pagan drove a bus in Puerto Rico and made \$100 to \$250 a week. Now, he could make \$300 a week at the processing plant cutting wings and thighs.

He was quick with a knife and scissors on the de-boning line. In just over a year, he was promoted to supervisor. That meant an extra \$100 a week, he said. He would wear a hard hat signifying his new role as a boss.

Pressure to produce

Pagan's department was required to keep production levels between 150 to 160 birds a minute, about 70,000 a day, he remembers. No excuses.

If his workers fell behind, it was his job to make sure they caught up. If they could not get the work done in eight hours, they stayed overtime until they finished, he said.

Managers warned workers that the plant lost money every second the line slowed or stopped.

Upper management in white hard hats pushed production managers in red hard hats – who pushed supervisors like Pagan, in orange hard hats. Workers received the brunt.

Latino workers were accustomed to their American bosses yelling at them. But what really hurt, several workers said, was the disparaging treatment by Latino supervisors who shared their background and understood the struggles of being an immigrant in the U.S.

One Guatemalan line worker, Miguel, said several supervisors treated fellow Latinos as if they were “*desechables*” or disposables.

“They treat you like you're not human,” said Miguel, who asked that his last name not be used for fear of losing his job.

Barry Cronin, House of Raeford's complex manager in Greenville, said in a written response that “our supervisors were never asked to use fear and intimidation against our employees.”

Pagan acquired a reputation as one of the toughest line supervisors, particularly with Guatemalan workers who often spoke Mayan dialects and knew little Spanish. He had a short temper and spoke rapidly when angry, workers recalled.

Former line worker Alberto Sosa called Pagan abusive and once confronted him in a storage area after he berated a Guatemalan for working too slowly. You don't have to treat people that way, Sosa remembers saying.

Pagan said he didn't recall the incident, but didn't deny it.

The workers, he said, didn't understand that missed production goals could cost him his job.

A wife's warning

Torres never wanted Pagan to be a supervisor.

All day, knife in hand, Torres made hundreds of cuts an hour. After about six months, her hands began to hurt. She said a supervisor screamed at her to work faster even after she complained about being in pain.

At home she had trouble cooking and cleaning. She couldn't open jars.

Torres' hands worsened. She would awake with her hands curled in a claw. The company sent her to a doctor who diagnosed her with carpal tunnel, she said. She had surgery. She went back to work, but left several months later because of the pain, she said.

Torres worried Pagan would become like her supervisor, who often scolded her. But Pagan dismissed her concerns. He said she just had a bad boss. He would never be like that.

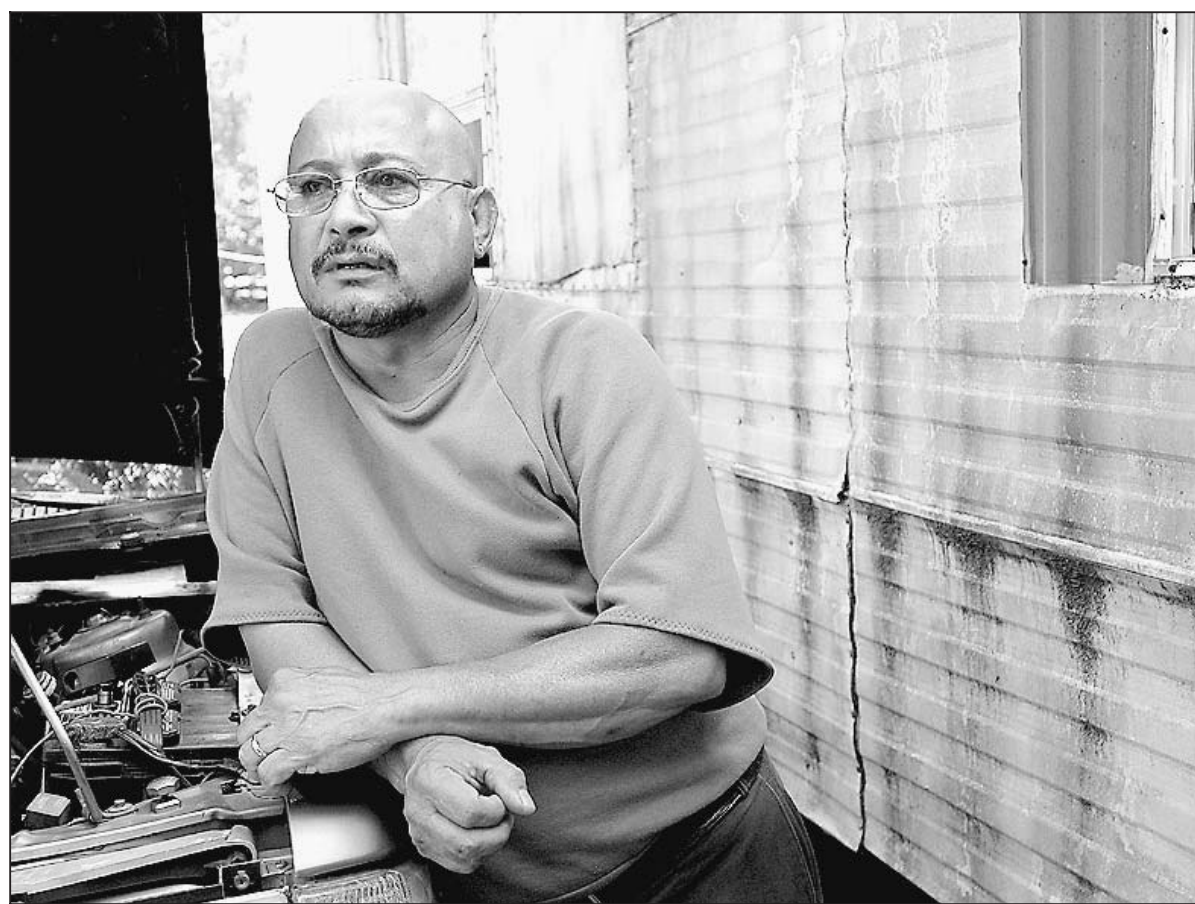
Touched by pain

Veronica Zapot worked on Pagan's line. She was a quiet, petite woman who kept her head down. But in 2001, she be-



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Lydia Torres says she had carpal tunnel surgery on her right hand after working at the House of Raeford poultry plant in Greenville, S.C. She says she quit when the pain became too much. More than five years later, her hands are better, but she still has pain and struggles with some routine tasks.



Enrique Pagan said he eventually warned employees that poultry work could ruin their hands. Most worked in pain, he said. “How can you not feel bad (for them)?”

House of Raeford

The privately held company, based in Raeford, is among the top 10 U.S. chicken and turkey producers.

Chairman: Marvin Johnson.

Size: Eight processing plants and 6,000 employees.

Customers:

■ Restaurants including Blimpie, Golden Corral and Ryan's.

■ Schools around the U.S., including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

■ Stores including Food Lion and Lowes Foods. The company's deli meat is marketed under the name “Lakewood Plantation.”

Sources: Observer research, House of Raeford, Dun & Bradstreet, Watt Publishing, National Poultry and Food Distributors Association

gan to complain about her hands. Pagan conceded the work was difficult, but if she wanted the job she would need to keep up, he said.

He later learned Zapot, then 30, lived a few blocks from his apartment. She told him about coming to the Carolinas from Coatzacoalcos, Mexico. She told him about her life as a single mother, and the challenges of raising children in the U.S.

He later invited Zapot to leave her baby with Torres, who was then taking care of several workers' children for extra money.

Pagan watched as Zapot struggled. She de-boned 200 to 300 chicken thighs an hour. Eventually, she said, the fingers of her hand locked into a claw – the way Torres' had. Unable to straighten them, she said she would have to tilt her hand to let the knife slip out.

“She'd come to me. She'd be holding her wrists,” Pagan said. “You could see

it in her eyes that she was in pain.”

He sent her to the first-aid attendant, who gave Zapot over-the-counter pain pills and a bandage, suggesting her throbbing hands came from cooking at home.

“She'd say, ‘You Mexicans, you make so many tortillas,’” Zapot said.

When Zapot visited a doctor on her own, she said she learned she had tendinitis. She later had surgery and won a worker's compensation settlement, according to her attorneys.

“The tendons in my fingers were in knots,” she said.

House of Raeford declined to comment on many of the employees' specific allegations, saying that, without signed releases, it was unable to discuss details of their health or employment. In general, the company said it found “many inaccuracies” in the information workers provided to the Observer but declined to elaborate.

“The allegations made by these former employees do not fairly or accurately represent the policies or management practices of House of Raeford Farms,” the company wrote. ... “We value our employees and strive to treat them in a fair and respectful manner at all times.”

‘Tell them to wait’

Pagan said he worried about his workers, but giving them breaks left him with fewer hands on the line. A boss once admonished Pagan for sending workers to the first-aid station, he said.

Three other ex-supervisors and a former human resources employee similarly described a culture where supervisors dismissed employee's complaints. Caitlyn Davis, who worked in the human resources department until she quit in July, said one supervisor referred to his Latino assistants as “Thing 1” and “Thing 2.”

Another former supervisor told the Observer: “They tell you to not let people off the line. ‘To wait. To wait. Tell

them to wait until the break. Tell them to wait until someone else can replace them. Tell them to wait until after work.’ It's always to wait. The pain doesn't wait.”

The supervisor said he was fired after receiving three or four reprimands, the last for a safety violation. He requested his name not be used because he still has relatives working for the company.

Cronic, the Greenville complex manager, said in a written response, “If any supervisor is discouraging employees from reporting injuries, that supervisor is in violation of company policy.”

New pressure

In 2004, four years after becoming a supervisor, Pagan woke up in a sweat. It was about 2 a.m. He was shaking.

Torres asked what was wrong. He said a boss was increasing the pressure on supervisors.

My stomach's tied in knots, he said. I don't know how long I can stay.

Torres said he often came home angry. He became detached. He lost his sense of humor. It affected their sex life.

“I didn't have any will to do anything,” Pagan said.

In early 2005, good news came. A social worker told the couple that a family had offered a baby for adoption.

Pagan had four children from a previous marriage. Torres had none and did not want to go through infertility treatments she needed to become pregnant.

Three days later, on Feb. 14, they brought Bryant home. He was four days old and weighed less than 9 pounds.

“He was the tiniest thing,” Torres said.

The couple knew that social workers would visit the family regularly to check on Bryant's progress. They would want to know that the boy was being well cared for and that the family had the financial means to support the child. It would be two years before Bryant would be officially theirs.

Pagan needed his job more than ever.

Final conflict

Pagan was overseeing more than 100 workers.

He quietly began to warn some about their hands. He allowed more first-aid breaks.

After work, mothers would come to Pagan's home to pick up their children from Torres. They would often complain about their hands. Several, like Carolina Cruz, did not have the hand strength to hold their children. Cruz relied on her forearms to lift and hug her young son, Jose.

Pagan said he felt bad for the workers but angry at them for enduring the pain. He never advised them to quit because he knew their families needed the money. But he encouraged them to look for other jobs.

“You shouldn't do this work,” he recalls telling them. “You'll ruin your hands.”

“Look at Veronica. Look at Lydia. She can't even brush her hair.”

Pagan said he was meeting his production goals in early 2006, but was being blamed more for workers' mistakes.

A boss pulled him into an office, he said, and reprimanded him for leaving too much meat on the floor.

Pagan said he was told to sign a disciplinary note for his personnel file. He was being punished, he believed, for giving workers too many breaks.

He refused to sign and walked out.

‘I'll never go back’

Torres gave their dining room table to a niece. Pagan sold his car to a friend. They took most of the pictures off the wall, but left U.S. and Puerto Rican flags hanging in the living room. They packed their belongings into 40 boxes and shipped them to Puerto Rico.

Pagan said he planned to buy a used bus and hoped to get a public route again.

Before leaving, he made one last visit to the plant. He walked along one of the wooded trails lined with discarded gloves and hairnets. He stopped near a picnic table and spoke about his former job.

He had hoped for more when he came to Greenville. He and Torres did make enough money to buy a four-room house in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico, and they adopted their son, Bryant.

But he said he'll never forget how Latinos were treated at the poultry plant – and how he felt forced to treat them. Did he have a choice? No, he says, not if he wanted to keep his job.

“I'll never go back,” he said.

Moments later, a man with a red hard hat walked out a plant door. Pagan took a long look. It was one of his former bosses.

“We should go before he says something,” he said.

Pagan turned away from the poultry plant and walked back up the path.

Epilogue

In August, Pagan and Torres moved back to Puerto Rico.

Torres stays home with Bryant. Pagan drives a bus again.

“I feel good here,” he says. “I have family. The only thing is, you don't make much money to save.”

“She'd come to me. She'd be holding her wrists. You could see it in her eyes that she was in pain.”

ENRIQUE PAGAN, FORMER HOUSE OF RAEFORD SUPERVISOR