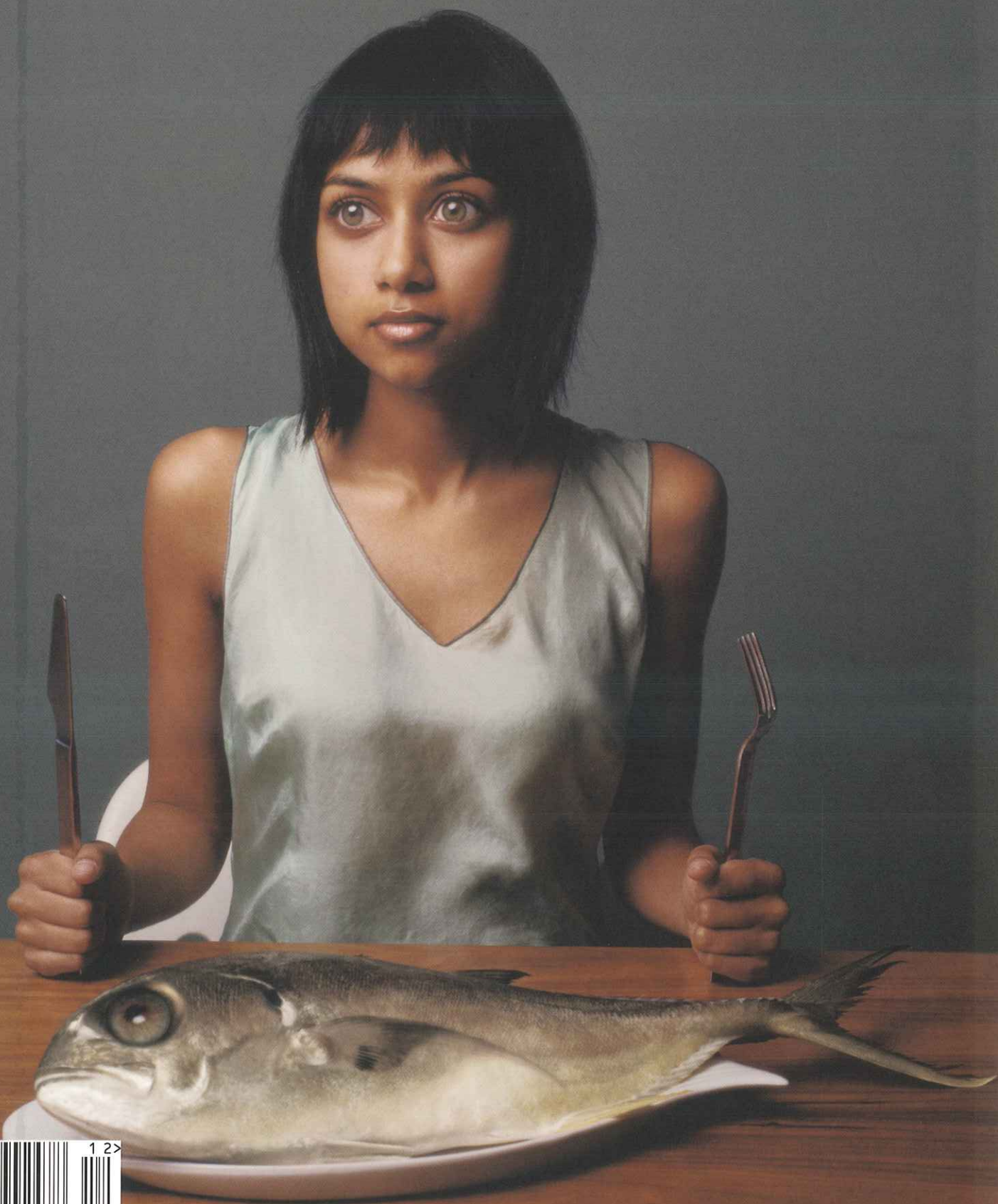


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Home Economics

HURRICANE ANDREW MADE LANDFALL near Homestead, Florida, at about 5:00 A.M. on August 24, 1992. The powerful storm's 150-mile-per-hour winds ripped into the coastal area just south of Miami, slamming into a dilapidated, county-owned trailer park that for two decades had served as a "temporary" work camp for the migrants who picked citrus, tomatoes, and other crops in the Dade County's gravelly soil. Miraculously, no one who lived in the park was injured. At that time of year, most migrant workers are in northern states. However, all but two of the trailers were demolished, reduced to heaps of splintered two-by-fours, twisted aluminum siding, and ripped-apart furniture. Andrew left the 154 families who lived in the camp at the time homeless. That hurricane turned out to be one of the best things ever to happen to Florida's farmworkers.

In the aftermath of Andrew, South Florida found itself awash in offers of federal disaster relief funding. Farmers desperately needed shelter for the workers who would soon be arriving to pick the winter's harvest. The board of the Everglades Community Association, which managed worker housing in the county, hired Steven Kirk to oversee reconstruction. It was a classic case of the right person for the right job. Kirk, who had studied public policy at Duke University, became a passionate advocate for farmworker justice after spending a summer interviewing vegetable pickers in North Carolina under the supervision of oral historian and author Robert Coles. One day he stumbled across a couple of African American men tied to a tree. They told him that their boss had roped them there to prevent their escaping. Once Kirk cut them loose, he rented them rooms in a motel until authorities came.

Kirk spent the early part of his career knocking around Washington, D.C., working for various farm laborers' groups and other antipoverty organizations, gaining insight into how to manipulate levers of power and loosen purse strings in the nation's capitol. Upon arriving in Florida, he saw two courses of action for the Everglades Community Association. They could simply replicate the ugly, crime-ridden old

camp by acquiring a few hundred replacement trailers and slapping them down in straight barracks-like rows on cement pads, or they could do something no one else had attempted: build a functioning farmworkers' community.

Today, Everglades Farmworker Village, as the 120-acre development that sprang up on the ground occupied by that old trailer park is called, is the country's largest farmworker housing project. In one of the electric golf carts that provide the primary mode of transportation for village maintenance people and other employees, Kirk gave me a tour of the village. Short, blue-jean-clad, with mussed, thinning hair, Kirk is in his mid-fifties. As we purred through a pleasant network of curving streets bordered by palm trees, he told me that the community is home to nearly 2,000 mostly Hispanic workers whose average family income is between \$16,000 and \$18,000. The 493 housing units, pastel stucco over cement block, are mostly stand-alone single-family structures, side-by-side duplexes, or two-story townhouses. A couple dormitory-style buildings provide accommodations for 144 single men. The streets have curbs and gutters, and the landscaping is immaculate. The community has its own ten-acre park and soccer fields. A small grocery store, as a branch of a larger Hispanic supermarket in Homestead, provides a wide range of traditional products at reasonable prices. A Community Development Credit Union maintains an office here, and workers can get fairly priced loans and open bank accounts and make other financial transactions so they are not gouged by check-cashing companies and costly wire transfers.

Kirk made a deal with Barbara Mainster's Redlands Christian Migrant Association to run three daycare centers at Everglades serving three hundred preschoolers. An additional 250 older kids participate in organized after-school activities. The community has a space for religious services, a community hall for wedding receptions and *quinceañeras* (celebrations of a Latina girl's fifteenth birthday), a computer lab, a laundromat, and a health clinic. "There are a lot of people involved with low-income housing whose



Above: New farmworker housing in Winter Haven, Florida.

COURTESY OF RURAL NEIGHBORHOODS, INC.

attitude is, they are just going to tear the places apart, why make them nice,” Kirk said. He takes the opposite view, believing that if you have high expectations of tenants and give them quality accommodation, they will respect it. “And that has proved to be true,” he added.

In the world of migrant housing, the lowest of the low are single men. They are typically the ones relegated to sleeping ten or twelve to a trailer in places like Immokalee—if they have any place to stay at all. The backcountry of Florida is pocked with makeshift encampments of single workers who cannot find shelter. Even farmworkers with families shun their single brethren, associating them with loud music, drunken rowdiness, and unwanted interest in teenage daughters. But Kirk was determined to make a place for single men in Everglades Farmworker Village.

He stopped the golf cart and opened a gate that led into a shady courtyard surrounded by a U-shaped building whose façade was regularly interrupted by doors, giving the effect of a motel that had turned inward on itself. Gazebos and clusters of benches, chairs, and tables filled the courtyard. The principle, Kirk said, was to provide the men with

a space to mingle and socialize outdoors and that would also contain their activities and provide a measure of control over who entered the compound. Kirk opened the door to a unit, exposing us to a puff of air-conditioned air. The living room consisted of a single heavy, wooden table with benches set on a spotless linoleum floor. Off of that room was a kitchen with a stove and two refrigerators. “Eight guys share this space, we want them to have room to store their food,” Kirk explained. Four bedrooms extend off the main living area, each with two built-in twin beds. Toilets and showers were in separate rooms.

The quarters reminded me of the on-campus apartment where my college-aged daughter lived with four friends, only more spacious and cleaner. At \$175 per person a month including all utilities, the accommodations were a steal compared to the trailers I’d seen in Immokalee. And no one complained about the single guys. “We get more complaints about teenaged kids of married couples,” Kirk said.

When designing the village, Kirk sat down with prospective residents and asked them what features they wanted to see in their dwellings. Women wanted to have hookups for washers and dryers, plenty of storage space, and large kitchen windows so they could keep an eye on kids playing in the yard while they prepared meals. Men wanted parking places installed right up in front of the houses to deter anyone who might want to vandalize or steal their vehicles—in many cases, the only assets the families possessed. Everyone wanted to save money on electric bills, so houses included fans in every room and specially designed windows to ventilate homes, limiting the need to run expensive air conditioners. A gated entrance and night-time security were also on the workers' wish list.

In return, Kirk and the board, which included residents, had a few demands of their own. "We practice tough love," he said. Some might say it's paternalistic or downright authoritarian. But it works, Kirk insists. Quiet must prevail after 11:00 in the evening. Single men can have no overnight guests. Vehicles must be parked in designated places. No pets are allowed. No do-it-yourself paint jobs or landscaping projects are permitted. There are no clotheslines, a rule Kirk explained by saying that aesthetics are as important as any other issue to maintaining a sense of pride in the community. The final rule is you have to pay your rent, which is capped at one-third of a family's income. Government subsidies make up the rest, if necessary. "We don't evict people who are unable to pay. We evict them for refusal to pay," said Kirk. "If rent is affordable to people, it becomes a priority for them."

Early on, Kirk faced some competition for funding from farmers who wanted to build housing for their workers on their own land. Recalling incidents of being run off property by county sheriffs back in his student days when he was trying to interview the children of North Carolina farmworkers, Kirk adamantly opposed employer-built housing. "I don't want them in control," he said. "If you live down some dirt road where there's an armed security guard to keep people out, problems can develop. Here, if Greg Schell's paralegal wants to come down and meet with you, there's an office set aside. The opportunity for involuntary servitude in this community is pretty slim. There is always someone to reach out to."

In the 1990s, Kirk, a self-professed workaholic, spent many nights at his desk until 10:00 P.M., a muted TV in one corner of his office tuned to CNN providing a link to the outside world. Equal parts zealous missionary for the oppressed and hard-driving real-estate tycoon, Kirk had no family, few outside interests, and a very neglected girlfriend.

His fifty-million-dollar project was up and running. The creative, challenging part had been successfully completed, and suddenly Kirk found himself growing antsy. He went to his board of directors, which consisted entirely of local people whose interests were focused on county politics, and spelled out the situation. It was fine with him if they just wanted to run Everglades Village. "I told them, if that's the case, you need a property manager," he said. That job was not intellectually challenging enough for him. On the other hand, he said, the group could take what they had learned in building the village and try to spread affordable housing to farmworkers state-wide. "The situation is very, very bad upstate," he explained, saying that if they wanted to expand, he was their man. They told him that they were prepared to take the next steps.

Over the ensuing decade, an umbrella organization called Rural Neighborhoods, with Kirk as its president, built developments in Immokalee, La Belle, and Okeechobee in the southern part of the state, in Ruskin in the west, Fort Pierce in the east, and Winter Haven in central Florida. With low-interest loans from the United States Department of Agriculture and through federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credits that encourage private investors to put money into affordable housing projects, Rural Neighborhoods invested more than two hundred million dollars to build 1,300 units that house more than 4,500 tenants, mostly farmworkers. It was an astonishing accomplishment. Kirk credits his knowledge of how governmental agencies work and his acumen about what politicians and officials need for his ability to get his projects funded. A conservative governor taking heat for working conditions in Florida fields might be eager to allot housing funding to migrant housing as a goodwill gesture. "We let them co-opt us; and we co-opt them," said Kirk.

Other affordable housing advocates have criticized Kirk for the high quality of his housing. "Why spend \$100,000 per unit for architect-designed cement block and stucco structures when you can get a manufactured home for \$60,000?" they complain. Kirk is utterly unrepentant. Rural Neighborhoods has built the best apartments available, period, in places like Immokalee, La Belle, and Okeechobee, he says. "We've changed the perception of farmworker housing. I would be happy to live in any of our developments."

There is also an element of canniness in building attractive communities that look nothing like stereotypical farmworker housing. Given their propensity for being blasted into kindling with each passing hurricane, manufactured homes (glorified trailers, in the view of many) have an unsavory reputation. "Yeah, maybe we could house more

people for less money in the short run,” said Kirk. “But the political reality is that quality housing sells better to local lawmakers.” It is also a financial as well as a political reality. If a lender ever had to foreclose on a Rural Neighborhoods’ property, he could sell it to a landlord who could fill it with eager renters, not marginalized farmworkers, which makes it more likely that a bank will extend credit to Kirk.

Unlike most heads of charitable organizations, Kirk lives with the possibility of failure. Rural Neighborhoods may borrow at low interest rates through government programs, but the money it invests has to be paid back like any mortgage. Rents in its developments are set at a level that allows Rural Neighborhoods to break even, but higher-than-expected vacancy rates can quickly turn break-even budgeting into a losing proposition. “We are a risk-taking organization,” Kirk said. “We are doing multimillion-dollar deals. We guarantee loans. We could fail. But my view is that Bob Dylan thing, ‘He not busy being born is busy dying.’”

Just prior to my visiting him in 2010, Kirk did something completely out of character: He took off three days in a row. On the previous weekend, the fifty-five-year-old, lifelong bachelor had gotten married for the first time. But having entered into that state hadn’t done much to lessen his pace. He had 281 new units—thirty-five million dollars’ worth—under various stages of construction scheduled for occupancy within a year, all of which had to be paid for. The recession was making it tough even to providers of homes for the lowest of the low. Plus, Kirk was concerned that the immigration crackdown and resulting fear among migrants might suddenly leave him with unexpected vacancy rates. But none of those worries were slowing him down. “There’s need out there,” he said. “And if no one else is going to fill it, I have to step into the void.” He shrugged philosophically and added, “And even if we fail, I’m out of a job, but those new units will still be there.” ☉