Protecting Rights and Righting Wrongs

Alumnus Bruce Goldstein helps give voice to migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

by David Fiedler

Bruce Goldstein faces some powerful opponents. As co-executive director of the Farmworker Justice Fund, Inc. (FJF), he takes on some of the giants in government and agribusiness on behalf of a group that has never had much in the way of voice or representation—the 1.6 million migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the United States.

Goldstein, JD ’80, says the mission of the Washington, D.C.-based organization is simple: to improve the wages and working conditions of farmworkers, who have often been exploited in the United States due to their lack of status and influence.

FJF engages in litigation, lobbying, administrative advocacy, training of farmworkers and legal advocates, and public relations campaigns. The group focuses on immigration policy, labor law, occupational safety and health, and access to justice.

“We try to get the workers the minimum wages and benefits guaranteed to them by law and to improve their wages and working conditions through legislation,” says Goldstein. Much of his work concerns agricultural employers’ demands for a new temporary foreign worker program. FJF prefers that farmworkers be granted immigration status, leading to citizenship. “We believe that guest worker programs are inconsistent with America’s democratic values,” says Goldstein, noting that Congress is considering these policy options.

The scope of Goldstein’s efforts with FJF go beyond fortifying labor law for the benefit of farmworkers in this country. In June 2001, he served as a labor delegate to the United Nations’ International Labor Organization conference in Geneva, Switzerland. From that meeting came a convention designed to guarantee basic safety and health protections to agricultural workers around the world.

“These standards would require governments to treat farmworkers equally with other workers in such areas as workers’ compensation benefits and to be provided information about the particular toxic chemicals used on their jobs and the potential health risks associated with them,” says Goldstein.

His desire to work in public interest law and for progressive social change predated his time at Washington University. “I had been very much affected by the civil rights movement, the opposition to the Vietnam War, and the United Farm Workers and Cesar Chavez,” recalls Goldstein. “I felt that there were a lot of injustices in America, and I wanted to be a part of trying to reduce those injustices, particularly for poor people and people of color.”

After relocating with his wife, Robin Talbert, JD ’80, to Washington, D.C., Goldstein joined FJF in 1988 in a staff attorney position. In 1995 he was named co-executive director.

Goldstein stresses that the Farmworker Justice Fund works to maximize its reach by forming coalitions among groups with similar and intertwined interests, such as immigration rights organizations, labor organizations like the AFL-CIO, and various public health organizations. “A lot of what we do is try to build collaborations with organizations and people in society who are not actively working on behalf of the farmworkers, but who are willing to stand up for farmworkers’ rights.”

Clear victories don’t come along very often, however, when the opponent is the Department of Labor or an agribusiness giant with more attorneys on the payroll than there are paper clips in the cup on Goldstein’s desk.

“I just figure that what we have to do is get all of the Davids together,” says Goldstein of FJF’s coalition-building efforts. “Then together, we can beat the Goliaths.”