

Long-time offshore worker planned to return this season

Instead, he died suddenly, while waiting for a flight

Jane Andres
Special to The Local

Gladstone Pusey
August 30, 1963 –
March 18, 2021
Broken Bank, Rock River,
Clarendon

A gentleman. Hard worker. Dependable. A man of his word. An honourable man.

He liked to joke, to add a little levity when the going got tough at work on the farm.

These are a few of the words his coworkers used when describing Gussy. The name on his passport was Gladstone Pusey, his surname taken from the wealthy British plantation owner who relied on the labour of hundreds of enslaved men and women in 1718.

For hundreds of years, the wealth generated by the fertile Jamaican soil had literally built empires abroad in the U.K. and Scotland.

Gussy's ancestors have deep roots in the parish of Clarendon, each one with the dream of owning their own land and providing a secure life for a family of their own.

When Gussy married Eunice over 35 years ago in

the town of Rock River, the dream was no different. He loved farming, and working the soil that his parents had farmed on. Deep pockets of rich soil allowed coffee, cocoa, sugar cane, bananas, plantains, and yams to thrive, providing rich cash crops for centuries.

Radical economic changes coming their way, however, had an immediate impact on the once self-sufficient communities. Inequitable trade policies in the 1960s allowed heavily subsidized produce, powdered milk, and chicken from the U.S. to flood the markets, forcing small scale producers and dairies out of business. The collapse of local economies precipitated the immigration of thousands to the U.K. Many Jamaicans emigrated to Canada through the domestic worker program, which allowed families to stay intact.

In the mid-1960s Ontario tender fruit farmers were in a labour crisis, with crops going unharvested. The development of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) and the promise of a steady labour force heralded a new era of progress and expansion for Niagara farmers.

Men and women from the Caribbean came up on eight-month work programs, and also had the opportunity to be sponsored by their employer to bring their families and eventually become Canadian citizens. Many of these families have continued to live in Niagara, still contributing to our communities decades later. The path to immigration was discontinued in the early 1970s when Mexico joined the SAWP.

Gussy was only 23 years old when he started working at the Froese farm, where he was employed for the next 35 years.

Like many working on local farms, he only planned to stay on the program until he had his house built and livelihood established.

With the arrival of three children, Karlene, Gladstone Jr. and Saneicka, his responsibilities grew at home. The cost of living on the island increased exponentially, and with it came the realization that there was not going to be a recovery to the Jamaican economy in the foreseeable future.

Returning to Canada each year became a way of life, not only for Gussy but

for thousands of Jamaicans.

Gussy was scrupulous with his earnings. The steady devaluation of the Canadian dollar had a direct impact on the purchasing power of his paycheque back home. Every dollar was carefully budgeted to build his house, invest in his farm, pay for his children's education, and transportation expenses, as well as set aside the necessary funds for his application fees for the following year.

After eight long months away he couldn't wait until the familiar sights of Rock River came into view. The lights in his cheery bright green home at the end of the lane were always shining bright no matter what hour he arrived home. Who could sleep when dad was coming back with a heavy suitcase full of goodies from Canada?

Turning up the path with a packed suitcase at the end of the season and a long journey home, the cheerful sight of his bright green house with pink trim lightened his steps.

He valued every moment at home for the four months he was able to be with his family. Taking no time to rest after his return, he plunged into work on his own farm.

His days started at 5:30 a.m. He was at his happiest when, after tending to the goats, he would head up the narrow path to distant fields on Gretta, his surefooted donkey. A slow cascade of golden sunlight rippling down terraced fields would warm his back. Overhead in the breadfruit tree the jabblin crows would be nattering like ladies gossiping after a church service. Later he would head back with a sack of yams, cassava, and bananas, checking first the sweetness of his Julie mangos in the yard before washing up for breakfast.

He found great delight in the three grandchildren who doted on their grandpa. Every morning his six-year-old grandchild would bring him his tea for breakfast. He would laugh when his two-year-old grandchild recently started sneaking into his bedroom before dawn, bringing him his "cutlass" (a gardening tool) and say "time to cut bush, Grandpa!"

He supplemented his income with a taxi route. His clientele knew the amiable driver well, trusting his skills as he navigated the winding roads that clung tenaciously to the mountainsides. Locally they referred to him affectionately as "Stamma," a nickname bestowed on him years earlier.

When he was here in Niagara for eight months, there were constant concerns of life in limbo, and being sep-



Typical Gussy, lightening the mood after a long day harvesting peaches during a heat wave, says Jane Andres. He is sporting three old, frayed baseball caps displaying the Jamaican colours — Jamaica proud. (Jane Andres)

arated from family when he was away from them. This weighed heavily when there was illness in the family, or during hurricane season. When monster hurricanes slammed into the island in 1988, 2004, and 2007, he and his coworkers could only pray and hope their families were safe.

Preparing to leave for such a lengthy absence required advance planning, and for those with farms, many long days to get crops planted or harvested, depending on the time of year.

The past year had been very hard financially, with grocery costs escalating exponentially due to COVID. They normally raise about 50 chickens to sell as broilers, but the rising cost of grain for their feed made it prohibitively expensive. A regular cabbage at a grocery store in a nearby city cost \$25 U.S.

It was also becoming more costly to apply for the farm work program. There are multiple trips to Kingston for their pre-flight medicals, work permits, biometrics, police checks, and more recently, COVID tests.

The pandemic created unexpected complications and increasing stress for those on the farm work program.

On March 14, 2021, Gussy arrived at the Ministry of Labour as instructed, with the rest of the farm crew, to get their pre-flight COVID test. In order to reach the Ministry by 7 a.m. many of them had to leave home around 1 a.m., or even the night before. Gussy and a co-worker were taken aside and told to go home. They were instructed to return for their flight a month later, even though they had just taken

the COVID test.

He returned home late that night after several hours of travel and no sleep. For the next two days he was distraught at the loss of income and the cost of an additional trip to Kingston.

Early on March 18, he went to the little grove behind his house to cut some fresh plantain for breakfast. He returned shortly with stomach pains, thinking it was the stress of the past week. His little granddaughter quickly brought him his cup of tea, and he thanked her, drinking it so as not to hurt her feelings. The family decided he needed to be taken to the emergency department, but they believe he suffered a heart attack, and passed away in their presence, before they arrived at the hospital.

The family was in shock. He was only 58, and had seemed in excellent health, as was indicated in his medical exam a few weeks earlier. He had already invested several hundred dollars in required tests and related costs preparing for the upcoming season.

They were forced to sell the car he used as a taxi to pay for his funeral costs.

Gussy had lived and worked eight months of the year for 35 years in our neighbourhood, longer than most of the Canadian residents. As many local farmers have emphasized this past year, men like Gussy have played an essential role in the success of Niagara's agricultural industry for the past 55 years.

He was and remains deeply loved by his family, coworkers, and Canadian friends.

June is Seniors Month



Golden Years
Guide

June 2, 9, 16 & 23
4 week special

Choose one of the corner ad spots
(5" w x 4" h) and once during
the month, receive the bonus
half page space

- Bonus space may be used for a story
you provide or a large display ad -



Booking Deadline: Thursday, May 27th

The Niagara-on-the-Lake
Local
The Trusted Voice of Our Community

NOTL businesses contact
Karen at 905-641-5335
or karen@notllocal.com

Businesses outside NOTL contact
Julia at 905-934-1040
or julia@notllocal.com

Making connections enriches a community

Jane Andres
Special to The Local

It's a Tuesday night and I'm pulling up to the Serluca farm on Concession 2, the car loaded with groceries. Dan, the farm owner, greets me with a big smile and waves me in towards the bunkhouse. A young man is sitting on the steps, engrossed in his phone messages.

I greet him in Jamaican patois from my car and he looks up, startled. I don't recognize him and assume he's new to the farm. Some of his coworkers amble out of the kitchen and onto the porch to check out the visitor, their faces lighting up in recognition. The tantalizing aroma of pimento, garlic, and jerk spices are wafting out of the open door. It's been over a year since we've seen each other because of COVID restrictions, and the joy of this unexpected visit is mutual.

There have been no hugs or handshakes the past 16 months, but their smiles radiate warmth even at 20 feet away.

I ask the young man his name and where he's from. The men laugh when Kemar says "Jamaica," and look at each other knowingly. They understand where this conversation is going.

When I enquire about his hometown, the conversation goes back and forth, and he is emphatic I would have never heard of his small hometown.

"Maybe I've been there. Maybe I've even driven by your house."

He laughs, rolling his eyes. "I don't think so. Long Bough is just a likkle town, wet out inna bush."

When I inform him that I had indeed stayed in the town of Long Bough, his eyebrows shoot up, the other men laughing at how I play the "connection" game.

I tell him I went to Long Bough in February, 2020, to stay at the home of Delroy and Joan Castella. Delroy had been coming to work in my neighbourhood for 35 years, and in 2019 suffered a stroke during harvest. I spoke of the many people who connected with Delroy over the months he stayed with us during his recovery, which resulted in him being the guest of honour at the Candlelight Stroll in December before he returned home. I describe how he lit the first candle that night, passing the flame to the lord mayor, who in turn passed it on to others, growing exponentially until the whole street was filled with the warm glow of thousands of flickering candles.

Kemar shakes his head



Denzil Reid and Gary Salmon, Thwaites Farms employees, run into neighbours Marco Bubnic and his son Eddie. The Bubnics drop in regularly to say hi on their evening walks and enjoy having their Jamaican friends over for a barbecue or a cold drink on a hot day. (Photos by Jane Andres)

incredulously. He explains that he lives just down the road from Delroy and Joan, and that his mom attends the same church.

Finding ways to connect in conversation whether at the grocery store, in the bank or on the roadside is an exercise in joy! It amazes me how quickly a relationship can progress from being a stranger to a neighbour who feels welcome and appreciated.

When I started volunteering 16 years ago, I observed that migrant workers employed on local farms were not welcome by many in our community, despite the fact that our agricultural industry is totally dependent on them to survive.

After our first trip to Jamaica in 2007, I returned home with a new appreciation of the sacrifices required by these men and women and their families. Providing a warm welcome to our neighbours on the farms creates an opportunity to connect, but also means a lot to their families, who are keenly aware of their loved ones' experiences on the farms and in the community.

That year some friends and I began making soup and sandwiches to greet the workers arriving at farms in our neighbourhood, many who go almost 24 hours without a decent meal during their travels.

Soon after we put together welcome bags containing essentials to help them get through the first few days after arrival.

This idea has taken root and expanded in ways we

could not have imagined, as more locals contribute to show support.

More than 575 Caribbean workers received welcome kits in 2021, and we're not finished yet, with more emerging from mandatory quarantine in the next week. We have also delivered boxes of gloves, socks, neck buffs, toques, and essentials for some employers to distribute to their staff.

This year we created activity booklets for use during quarantine, which include two maps and practical information, such as biking distances from Virgil to Walmart, etc.

Welcome kits are a simple, inexpensive idea for locals of all ages who want to connect and express appreciation. News seems to be spreading about the great community spirit in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and people elsewhere in Ontario are contacting us, wanting to know how to provide support to farm workers in their own rural areas.

We primarily reach out to the Caribbean men and women. Rev. Antonio Illas and his wife Cela are the energetic duo who head up the Migrant Farmworker Project run by the Anglican Diocese of Niagara to care for the Spanish speaking farm workers. We share resources and work together to see how we can best meet the practical needs of all farm workers.

Regardless of where we are from, there is one thing that we all agree on: there is no substitute for personal connection, that Zoom can in no way replace a hug



Kemar Bailey, from Long Bough, Clarendon, is spending his first year on the farm work program, employed at the farm of Dan and Jayne Serluca. Arriving during a pandemic has been an experience everyone will long remember, but a warm welcome has eased some of his initial trepidation.

or heartfelt conversation. This past year, many of us have gained a better understanding of the hardship of long-distance family relationships as experienced by farm workers, who for the duration of their eight-month to two-year contracts have only a tiny screen, and very limited data on their phone, to keep those threads of relation-

ships intact.

Our fresh appreciation for human connection and face-to-face conversation has resulted in a growing number of cross-cultural friendships in our little corner of Niagara. Moving to Steps 2 and 3, I hear the sounds of children playing and backyard conversations, a mix of Jamaican patois and laughter floating

over the fence as families invite their Jamaican neighbours over for a Red Stripe and a time to relax, enjoying life together.

Recounting the story of Delroy to Kemar and his coworkers reminded me of how connecting with those who have traditionally been marginalized can transform a community, enriching all of us in the process.

Time to think about welcome kits for farm workers

Jane Andres
Special to The Local

This year will always be remembered as a year of extraordinary challenges. In Niagara-on-the-Lake, it will also be remembered as a time when a caring community shone brightly.

The delivery of more than 560 welcome kits to farm workers was a success because of the growing support of the people of this town. It has been a joy to meet so many locals who provided welcome kits for the men and women who braved a pandemic to come here and work, helping our farmers to avert a financial disaster and loss of crops.

The idea of welcome kits started from a simple observation in 2008, when my friend Jodie Godwin and I travelled to Jamaica. It was my second trip, and Jodie's first. We stayed with farm workers and their families, travelling from Montego Bay to Kingston, visiting churches and schools along the way. Our memorable visits with their families led to a greater understanding of the many challenges farm workers face while here on the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program.

Every year farm workers arrive after their flights at the Virgil arena, often late at night, after an exhausting day or more of travel. They have to wait until the following day to go to the bank, get groceries and finally start cooking their first meal by the afternoon.

When we realized how long friends on neighbouring farms had to wait to get a proper meal, we began to provide soup and sandwiches on their arrival to see them through the first night.

The idea of a simple

welcome kit containing essentials evolved, letting our Caribbean and Mexican neighbours know they are supported by a caring community.

The kits are easy and inexpensive to pack, as well as a fun and practical way for individuals, families, and community groups to express appreciation. A thank you note or child's drawing adds a personal touch that many bring home to share with their families. Some of the welcome posters made by children are still there to brighten their walls years later.

More than 500 bags have been distributed each year for the past three years as the men and women arrived. Over the last two years, we partnered with Father Antonio Illas, who organizes the Migrant Workers Outreach Project through the Anglican diocese. As a result, many more Spanish speaking workers have received support.

An abundance of welcome kits was filled by community members as Christmas projects at the end of 2019. It was the beginning of an exponential show of generosity. Financial donations from the Candlelight Stroll and Wineries of Niagara-on-the-Lake got the new year off to a great start.

More than 300 of the welcome kits were delivered before the news of an impending pandemic descended in mid-March. Thank goodness we had stockpiled toilet paper to include in the bags, as we would never have anticipated shortages for this crucial item.

When remaining deliveries resumed later in April, safety protocols were strictly maintained, with no-contact drop offs.



Socks for Change, a charitable organization from Niagara, provides heavy-duty, made-in-Canada work socks for \$2 a pair. Sam Baio, the organizer, also provides Niagara Workers Welcome with several hundred balaclavas, neck buffs and ear warmers at no charge, which are greatly appreciated by all of the men working in -10 degree temperatures. (Jane Andres)

Many of the workers arrived weeks late. The high stakes of leaving their families for eight months and putting their lives at risk were first and foremost on everyone's mind. The bright green bags welcoming them on their arrival provided much appreciated essentials, and the reassurance that they were not alone.

The welcome kits have proven to be a practical way to connect with migrant farm workers in our community, helping to create a sense of connection and belonging.

The events of this past year have demonstrated how vital these connections are.

Together we are a caring community.

A list of contents for kits can be found on the Niagara Workers

Welcome website.

Bags can be picked up at the NOTL Public Library, Sweets & Swirls Café and Applewood Hollow Bed and Breakfast.

Completed welcome kits can be dropped off at all three locations,

starting Jan. 18.

For those who would like to support this successful local endeavour, a donation of \$25 will provide the contents of a welcome kit for one farm worker.

Please visit our website

for updated information regarding collection times and drop-off locations.

For more information, email niagara.workerswelcome@gmail.com, or visit our website at www.workers.welcomeniagara.com.



Leticia Delgado, Laura Díaz and Veronica were the first recipients of welcome kits on Jan. 8, 2020. They also received some much-needed cookware, thanks to a quick response to their request from Julia Buxton-Cox and the Buy Nothing group on Facebook. (Jane Andres)

Greetings from our home to your home

Celebrate the holidays safely with local family and friends - send them your heartfelt greetings for the 2020 season in the NOTL Local.

Barbara wishes all her NOTL friends a safe and happy holiday season and looks forward to seeing them all in 2021.

3 col w x 30 lines h
(5" w x 2 1/8" h)
\$20

3 col w x 60 lines h
(5" w x 4 1/4" h)
\$40

Publication dates: choice of Dec 17, 24, 31
Deadline: Monday noon of each week

The Niagara-on-the-Lake

LOCAL

The trusted voice of our community.

E-mail your message and photo (optional) with your desired publication date to:

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Reach out safely to your community friends and family with our greeting special for residents