



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HCC Board Member Suzanne Gladney Advocates for Migrant Farm Workers

Suzanne Gladney, founder of Migrant Farmworkers Assistance Fund (MFAF) and a Health Care Collaborative (HCC) of Rural Missouri board member, knew she wanted to become an attorney since elementary school. Her father owned restaurants; one was a half block from the courthouse in Columbia, Missouri. Her inspiration grew from interactions with lawyers and judges who often visited the restaurant. Gladney is now an immigrant attorney and supervises MFAF, which assists migrant farm workers who pick fruits and vegetables in Missouri.

Gladney founded MFAF as a nonprofit in 1984. She served as a lawyer at Legal Aid of Western Missouri for 39 years, and formed the nonprofit inside Legal Aid. Immigration law was her focus both as a managing attorney of the Legal Aid West office, and in her own practice. “Little by little, I began to see people here and there every year who were migratory farm workers. I became interested in what their lives were like and what they were doing,” Gladney said. Once she met more migrant farm workers, she began to realize small, rural areas did not offer the services needed. “It seemed like there needed to be an organization that would help them with other things besides legal issues. So, I formed the nonprofit as the social services part to help meet their needs.”

Challenges arose with the development of this new organization. One initial trial...finding an office location in Lafayette County. “When the staff was in Kansas City, we were in the Legal Aid office, but when we were working out of Lafayette County, and other parts of Missouri, we needed to have a home base to keep food pantry items and those sorts of things,” Gladney explained. With the help of networks and collaborations, the organization has served and empowered Missouri’s farm workers for 34 years.

Gladney and the staff at MFAF share a deep concern for these families. When asked what the most rewarding part of her career is, Gladney simply answers, “Meeting people, and getting to know them and their stories.” She says she looks forward to them coming back the next year. Many farm worker families say it is because of MFAF’s support that they return to Western Missouri each fall, and an increasing number have decided to settle permanently, according to the MFAF website.

Migrant farm workers are skilled workers and play a vital role in our local food economies. Gladney says these workers are somewhat invisible to the permanent population in these small towns even though they are important to local communities. Many don’t have their own transportation since they often arrive in vans or buses, and live in labor camps far off the road.

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They face both physical isolation and a language barrier. “I think it is kind of hard to get to know someone when you aren’t able to speak to them in their own language and they aren’t able to speak in yours,” Gladney explains. MFAF helps to bridge those language gaps so migrant farm workers feel more connected to the community. It is important to have local volunteers and local organizations involved with MFAF.

Health care case management is a large part of MFAF, and how they became involved with the Health Care Collaborative (HCC) of Rural Missouri. Gladney now plays a critical role on HCC’s Executive Board. MFAF became a member of HCC’s rural health care network, and helped with the establishment of the Live Well Community Health Center in Waverly. “There is a Rodgers clinic in Lexington, but these other cities are 20 miles away and there is no bus or taxi cab. So, there was a need for health clinics in these other small towns,” Gladney shared. HCC now has four Live Well Community Health Centers located in Buckner, Carrollton, Concordia and Waverly.

Gladney credits HCC’s network for helping bring together organizations, which is essential for smaller organizations like MFAF. She believes their strength lies in their collaborative mode of operation, coupled with a keen expertise as a rural health network. “I think that networking and having a group of people who are from various small communities working together is just a really powerful way of mitigating the isolation and lack of resources in some of these small towns.” She encourages both organizations and individuals to become a part of HCC’s network. “What HCC does goes beyond health care. It is helping these small communities and small organizations become stronger.”

HCC is governed by a 10-member executive board of directors and supported by a growing general membership committee. HCC's board ensures that HCC is developing and implementing innovative, integrated programs that encourage collaboration, cultural competency and sustainability. HCC has established both a network and several committees to help reach these goals. HCC is also the only rural health network in the county with federally qualified health centers in the U.S. For more information, visit hccnetwork.org/about-us.

Volunteer opportunities allow the community to know the workers better and hear their stories. Individuals interested in volunteering or donating may contact MFAF at 816.968.2227, or mfpstaff@gmail.com.

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