

CIRS Executive Director retires after 22 years

The California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) said good-bye to its long-time leader and co-founder Don Villarejo, who retired in June after 22 years at the helm. Incorporated in 1977, CIRS has made unparalleled contributions to the scholarship of rural California



Kathy Kertley Garvey

Don Villarejo

through its research on farm labor, pesticide and water issues, particularly in California's Central Valley. As CIRS' co-founder and its first executive director, Villarejo has been instrumental in sustaining both the integrity of CIRS research and the financial strength of the Institute. In the last year alone, Villarejo has secured close to \$1 million in grants covering some of the most pressing issues facing rural California: the health status of our hired farmworkers, the future of rural communities dependent upon increasingly insecure water supplies, and the changing face of rural California given the increasing demand for foreign-born agricultural workers.

CIRS has established itself as one of the foremost think tanks in collaborative relationships with community and activist organizations in California. This is based on the accomplishment of balancing the need for objective research and working closely with people in the community to be able to respond to current issues affecting them.

Early on CIRS collaborated with rural communities on pesticide issues, creating slide shows and training materials, and bringing pesticide issues to the forefront in California. And in the late 1980s, Villarejo embarked upon the Farm Labor and Rural Poverty project bringing CIRS to the fields, directly talking with workers. Up to that point, much of the work had been based on primary records found in public record sources or in secondary sources.

"Most of what I know about farm labor in this state I learned because of the access to communities that Luis Magaña provided," said Villarejo. Magaña was hired on the recommendation of the advisory committee to the Farm Labor and Rural Poverty Project, and served as liaison between rural communities and CIRS keeping both sides apprised of the issues and work being done toward resolutions. "He excelled at providing assistance to individuals. He was a social worker, a caseworker as well as a leader."

According to Villarejo, Magaña's work brought to attention issues that CIRS wouldn't have gotten involved in. For example, when Magaña learned of the accidental deaths of three irrigation workers in a field near Linden who had been electrocuted while holding irrigation pipe in the field, CIRS created a special fund for the families of the workers.

"Something over \$5,000 came in from all over Northern California," said Villarejo. "These funds were brought personally by Magaña to the families in Michoacan, Mexico, and there was a feeling created that there are people in the North, in the United States, in California who

really cared about what happened in this accident."

A new relationship with the UC Agricultural Health & Safety Center in 1991 broadened the scope of CIRS. Villarejo found himself collaborating with the state labor commissioner, investigators from the U.S. Department of Labor and Cal OSHA. He provided officials with information they needed to do a better job of enforcement and, in turn, CIRS collected data about enforcement activities helping Villarejo to understand how enforcement related to improving the health and safety of agricultural workers.

"As one of the UC Agricultural Health & Safety Center's original investigators, Don has made a major contribution to agricultural health and safety among farmworkers in California by combining knowledge of the community, scientific principles and a compassion and commitment to his work," says Center Director Marc Schenker. "Don is equally at home in the legislature, a scientific meeting or a migrant farmworker camp. It has been a great pleasure and honor to work with him, and I am certain that his efforts will continue to have an impact on the Center and in the state."

Villarejo will most certainly be missed by his staff members and by all who have had the pleasure to meet and interact with him. In retirement, Villarejo says he will spend a lot of time with his grandson, Zachery. He also plans to travel, garden and take dance lessons with his wife, Merna, a professor of microbiology at UC Davis, who also retired in June.

After an extensive nationwide search, CIRS selected David Lighthall, Ph.D., as the new executive director of the California Institute of Rural Studies (to be introduced in the next issue of News).

Information for this article was excerpted from an article that appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of Rural California Report, a newsletter of the California Institute for Rural Studies.



From left, Bill Krycin, of Cal OSHA, CIRS Director Don Villarejo and Center Director Marc Schenker at Villarejo's retirement reception in June.