

## Lake Apopka Toxic Tour, Restoring Hope Initiative Field Trip by Alice Williams



On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, a group of 17 St. Lukers and friends visited the Apopka office of the Farmworker Association of Florida for a look at the plight of some of the unsung heroes in the food production process.

On the north shores of Lake Apopka an all too silent travesty has taken place impacting members of our local community, our food supply, and the environment. Farm workers, primarily composed of long-term minority residents of Apopka and immigrant workers

who migrate from crop to crop, worked in difficult and toxic conditions. Beginning in the early 1940s, muck farms on the northern shore of then pristine Lake Apopka became a thriving source for corn, cabbage, lettuce, cucumbers and other vegetables. In the process, the workers who helped grow and harvest these crops have been exposed to toxic chemicals such as DDT and other organic pesticides. The long-term effects on the workers and on Lake Apopka are yet to be fully understood, but both have suffered greatly.

The well documented long-term effect of various chemical agents in both the water and the soil have had a negative impact on the clarity, viability, and habitat of Lake Apopka over the years. What was once a haven for bass fishing that drew the likes of Clark Gable and other well-known personalities, has now become a lake that is desolate of most aquatic life. While significant efforts have been made over the last 20 years to improve lake's condition, the water quality of the lake has only seen marginal improvements. Estimates are that it will take decades for the lake to recover from the effects of the run-off from the muck farms which were closed in the 1980s. The earth surrounding the lake will take even longer to heal as the pesticides that were once used in the 50s and 60s have formed a lasting chemical bond with the soil.

But it's the farm workers, those who planted, tended and harvested the crops who have suffered most. Because the effects of the pesticides weren't widely known at the time, it was not uncommon for them to be working in the fields when the crop dusters sprayed. This exposure as led to an increase in cancer, diabetes and lupus among the workers and their offspring. Sadly, little has been done to provide medical assistance and reparation to those who have suffered the most.

While this may sound like a hopeless story, it is not. There are things that each of us can do to help. First, awareness of both the physical impact to the workers and the environmental condition of Lake Apopka is key. Consider making a trip to the Farmworker Association of Florida Office in Apopka to see and hear firsthand the story of the Farmworkers in our community. Second, take a look at the work Friends of Lake Apopka is doing to help ensure the

plight of one of Florida's largest freshwater lakes is understood. Third, use your voice – contact local government officials and the Southwest Water Management District and ask them to continue to support efforts to clean the environment and to provide much needed support of the health and well-being of those who suffered exposure to the chemicals used in the production of vegetable crops grown on the north shore of Lake Apopka. And the next time you sit at a meal, please say a prayer for all those involved in bringing food to our tables.

For more information go to [www.floridafarmworkers.org](http://www.floridafarmworkers.org)