



Mulberry packing facility. With this operation they are now competing with hothouse-grown tomatoes, both domestic and internationally.

The grape tomato division of East Coast Brokers and Packers has grown substantially over the past few years with shipments going to many of the major markets in the United States and some foreign countries. The label on the package of their King's Choice Grape tomato carries the NASCAR label. This cross-marketing campaign is a great idea for both NASCAR and East Coast Brokers.

While the tomato business has been relatively good, it hasn't always been that way. Late 2004, with the devastation of hurricanes Frances, Jeanne and Charley, it gave them and all farmers in Florida a real setback.

The hurricanes destroyed almost half of the Fall crop of tomatoes in Central Florida. East Coast Brokers and Packers had close to 2,000 acres of tomatoes. The loss of this crop left about half of their migrant work force out of work. Those who did work during this period had to get by on fewer hours.

The Madonias went to bat for their employees during this time by helping with housing and utility bills at a cost in excess of \$100,000 a month. Batista Madonia said, "We gave more than 200 families a free Thanksgiving Dinner."

Aside from hurricanes and freezing weather, one of their greatest catastrophes was a fire in the mid-nineties that destroyed their packinghouse. In spite of it all, they continued to work hard and they rebuilt the operation.

In December of last year, Evelyn and Batista Sr., purchased and presented a proposal to convert the Spurgeon Bible College, located adjacent to their tomato facility in Mulberry, just east of the Hillsborough/Polk County line on Highway 60, into a migrant worker's housing complex before the Polk County Planning Commission. It passed unopposed!

This 30-acre site, when completed, will house approximately 250 migrant farm workers employed at their East Coast Brokers & Packers, Inc. facility. Included in the complex will be living quarters, a day care center operated by the Redlands Christian Association (RCMA), a dining hall, clinic, recreation area and a church. Batista and Evelyn designated one of the large red brick buildings on the left as you enter the camp for use by RCMA.

Steven Madonia said, "This is a major undertaking. We have not only remodeled the on-site mobile homes, dorm, and dining hall, we have the necessary furniture too. When they move in all they need is their clothing and personal items."

This is without a doubt one of the largest, most unique migrant farm worker housing projects of its kind by individuals. It comes from two people with a loving heart, and a desire to help other people by supplying more than their basic needs. It is people like the Madonia's that makes our part of the world a better place. The purchase of this property and development was not a random act of kindness. This project has been in the mind of these two individuals, Evelyn and Batista Madonia, since 1958. Who knows, maybe they will start a revolution, a revolution of generosity. •