

# Area kids pick cherries way up north

BY RENEE SKOGLUND  
SPECIAL WRITER

If you ask Angela Standhardt, 18, of Birmingham, or Christian Skoglund, 15, of Canton, about their summer jobs, they're likely to say they were "the pits." Literally.

Standhardt and Skoglund, longtime friends, spent most of their summer "working cherries" in the Traverse City area. They soon learned, however, that the local expression for harvesting and processing one of Michigan's most popular fruits really meant "having no life."

While their families vacationed, the teens worked 10- to 12-hour night shifts six and seven days a week preparing cherries destined for commercial markets here and abroad.

Standhardt, a liberal arts student at Loyola University, worked as a "sorter" for Great Lakes Packing, a processing plant located in Kewadin, a small town about 15 miles north of Traverse City. Her job required a good eye for bad cherries, which she described as "bruised and pale."

She also needed strong arches. Except for a five-minute break on the hour, she stood in front of a conveyor belt her entire shift, scrutinizing cherries on their way

to being sugared and packed into 30-pound containers. But sore feet were the least of her worries. She had been warned by former sorters that she might get motion sickness.

"Some of the kids told me I might need Dramamine," she said. "I didn't, but it was difficult starting down at all those cherries for so long. I couldn't relax once I got home."

Standhardt's shift usually ended between 4 and 5 a.m. Afterward, she'd toss off her helmet and go out for breakfast or a swim with some of her co-workers. She willingly sacrificed valuable sleep time for a chance to socialize.

"I'd have no life otherwise," she said, waving a pair of purple-stained hands in front of her for emphasis. "No life."

Skoglund, a sophomore at Plymouth Canton High School, had no energy left to eat or swim after he emerged from the orchards each morning at 6 a.m. His job as a "tray puller" on one of the 12-person crews that worked for Cherry Ke Inc., also in Kewadin, left him with aching shoulders and stiff hands.

He had to pull out yards of heavy canvas tarp from a mechanized roller and lay it around each tree. After the "cherry shaker," a

specially designed truck with a long arm and pincers, shook the cherries off the tree, Skoglund would guide the tarp back toward the roller. As it rewound, the cherries would bounce into a tank of water. At least that's how it was supposed to work.

"I hated it when I'd slip," said Skoglund, whose hands and legs were covered with scratches and bruises. "All these cherries would fly up in the air and land all over me. And mud, and everything. One night I fell three times."

Skoglund, who earned the nickname "Mountain Man" because he broke all the branches that got in his way, threw out half his clothes when he got home. They were stained beyond salvage and smelled like sulphur and fermented cherries.

Standhardt didn't have to throw out as many clothes, but she's still applying lemon juice to her hands. She hopes they fade to a pale lavender before school starts.

"Guess I won't be doing any hand commercials for awhile," she said.

Both Standhardt and Skoglund admitted to positive experiences besides receiving a large dose of the American work ethic and honing their sense of humor.

"I met some really nice people," said Standhardt. "Maybe I'll do this again next year if they do."

Skoglund told of chasing deer during his breaks and gazing up into a black sky to watch meteor showers. Then he became more speculative.

"I learned about people. How they act, how they work, what they're really like. You're always with them."

The family that owns the two companies for which Standhardt and Skoglund worked plans to throw an appreciation picnic soon. They probably will serve cherry pie, cherry ice cream and cherry-topped cheesecake, all these luscious concoctions that wouldn't be possible without the efforts of people like Standhardt and Skoglund.

Standhardt and Skoglund would like to attend. But they'll ask for hamburgers. A little mustard, maybe some ketchup, a few onions. Skip the cherries.

Writer Renee Skoglund is Christian's mom.



Sorting it out: Angela Standhardt's (in baseball cap) summer job demands strong arches and an eye for bruised cherries.

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