

Sandy Clark Sample 1962-1967

I had never met or even seen a farmworker when I met Chris Hartmire. He had come to Union Theological Seminary in New York City to recruit seminary students to lead teams of college students in the California Migrant Ministry's summer program. My only awareness of what was called the "plight of migrant farmworkers" came from having watched and wept through Edward R. Murrow's TV documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, a year earlier.

It was the spring of 1962, and I felt a growing call to be engaged in some form of challenging faith-based work for justice. I was naive, eager, and ripe to become impassioned, so when Chris interviewed me and invited me to join in ministry with farmworkers for the summer, I jumped at the chance. For one who had not previously traveled farther west than Ohio, it seemed like high adventure, and I trekked westward that June full of faith and excitement.

The summer team training session in Modesto wore away a bit of my naivete and fed my emerging passion. The highlight of the weeklong training was a session led by a small, quiet unassuming man named Cesar Chavez, who enthralled our group of mostly middle-class, church-nurtured Anglo students. He spoke with intensity and clarity about the life of seasonal farmworkers, and about his dream of organizing them to claim their dignity and assert their rights as people of value against the powerful agribusiness interests that dominated their lives.

By week's end, we eagerly charged off to our assignments up and down the San Joaquin Valley. My team was assigned to two large public labor camps in Patterson and Westley, on the western side of Stanislaus County. Most of what we spent our days doing was quite benign: providing care and lively activities for the children left in the camps while their parents worked long days in the fields; teaching sewing and craft classes, and sometimes English classes; showing Friday night movies projected onto the washhouse wall; and driving pregnant women to Modesto's county health clinic. Most of us had little knowledge of Mexican-American culture beyond what our week of training had offered, and all of us were naive, but we were eager, energetic, full of faith, and fearless.

And we were welcomed with amazing warmth and hospitality by the families in the camps, a few of whom had met previous summer teams in their Harvester station wagons. We lived and worked together for six weeks that summer, in housing provided by church folk, and quickly came to know and care about farmworker families. We became increasingly aware of the major class distinctions dominating valley communities, and we met the occasional church volunteer who caught our enthusiasm and was willing to join us in the work we were doing. Some of us formed bonds of the heart with farmworker families that remain to this day.

The CMM Summer Program teams gathered for a midsummer camping weekend in the Sierra, where we reconnected with other teams, shared stories, and processed our experiences. At a final evaluation session in late August, we began to ask more critical questions about the best way to be involved with farmworkers. We wondered whether our work had a patronizing aspect and if we were simply putting Band-Aids on gaping systemic wounds. And then, with hugs and tears and hearts that would ever remember that powerful summer, we went back to live at our various colleges and seminaries.

I'd like to claim that none of us was ever the same after our CMM summer, but of course I can't speak for all those other eager young people. I do know that I had changed: I was less naive and more realistic about the powerful systems that oppress farmworkers, but I was also filled with great hope that the work of Cesar Chavez and his farmworker companions might somehow bring a measure of justice to an unjust and exploitative system. And I was deeply moved that farmworker families had somehow welcomed and trusted us across the great class/cultural divide that separated us.

As I returned to my seminary community, I was accompanied by the faces and stories of farmworker families I had come to care about—as well as the church people who had responded to our passionate pleas for justice for farmworkers and had joined us as volunteers. Those faces and stories lingered in my mind and heart throughout my second and third years at seminary, and back I came in the summers of '63 and '64 to lead other student teams in the Westley and Patterson camps. I renewed connections with returning farmworker families, met new ones, wondered what had happened to those who had not returned, preached to congregations that did not really want to hear our message, and engaged with my new team members in earnest Bible study and prayer around our work. Each summer I saw more clearly the entrenched power of agribusiness, and how voiceless and powerless farmworkers were. And I placed more hope in the organizing that Cesar Chavez was doing in farmworker communities throughout the valley.

After I graduated from seminary in 1964, the only call to ministry I was sure of was a calling to serve farmworkers as I moved through that third summer with my team. Chris Hartmire worked with various denominational executives to create a permanent position for me somewhere in a farmworker community in the San Joaquin Valley. The position that emerged was at a small mission church in South Modesto, the Community Church of the Brethren, which had been scheduled to close but was now given one last chance to continue as a congregation with me in the role of pastor/community worker.

Suffice it to say that there was not a smooth fit between the person I was and the congregation they were, and that the responsibility for what did not work was mutual. I was more impassioned about serving the community than the congregation was, and they wanted the kind of pastor that I was unable to be. We found ourselves in conflict over the march from Delano to Sacramento and the organizing work the California Center for Community Development was doing in South Modesto, both of which fed my passion for justice but alienated me from the congregation. By the late winter of 1966, it was clear that

instead of enlivening a struggling congregation, my style of ministry had finished it off, and the Church of the Brethren returned to its earlier decision and closed the church.

By that time, the California Migrant Ministry was moving from a ministry of service and advocacy to a ministry of servanthood, and it was developing an experimental worker-minister team program as a link between the faith community and the UFW. That model paired a seminary-trained minister-type with a farmworker partner, both working in the fields and doing preliminary organizing in conjunction with the UFW. I was invited to join the first group of participants and successfully lobbied to stay in Stanislaus County, in order to continue a budding romance with the man I later married. Because Stanislaus County was far from the action of UFW organizing priorities at that time, I was assigned to work in the fields to identify potential farmworker leaders and track any attempts at joint/cooperative action among the workers. This was so that the UFW might later build on that base. I would be doing this mostly on my own, without a farmworker partner. But with a sense of adventure, I leapt in.

And so in the fall of 1966, I found my way into the farmworker community in a new role--as a fellow worker. Farmworkers I knew from the Patterson and Westley camps helped me find work in the fields, and soon I was working on a tomato harvesting machine, alongside women young and old, all of us sorting tomatoes as they came along the belt, tossing rocks, dirt clods, green tomatoes, and frightened bunnies aside. I joined in as much of the camaraderie as I could, as an Anglo who knew little Spanish. The work was harder, more physically demanding, than any I had ever done, and I diligently kept records of the workers who expressed frustration about wages and working conditions, or threatened any work slowdowns.

When the tomato harvest ended, another farmworker friend got me a job with a crew pruning Thompson seedless grapes, which again required more skill and strength than I had previously needed to exercise. I discovered hitherto-unused muscles and learned to discriminate between canes that should be pruned and those that should be saved and attached to support wires. After that I spent several days pruning peaches for a small farmer, Sam Tyson, whom I had met in Delano when he delivered clothes to the strikers from his Friends Meeting. Farmworker friends from South Modesto showed me how to tell fruit-bearing branches from suckers and did the heavier work I wasn't strong enough to do. Sam was the only farmer I worked for who knew I was part of the worker-minister program.

It was, of course, critical to be incognito while I was working in the fields, and when I occasionally applied for work at a green Department of Employment trailer and was asked my level of education, I always answered, "Well, I made it through high school," and stopped there. That would usually trigger a response of "Well, you don't want to work in the fields all your life, do you?" and an attempt to upgrade me to cannery work. I was sure most Mexican-American farmworker women didn't receive comparable upgrade offers.

Most of the time I did not have a farmworker partner, because the UFW always needed them in more critical areas. Just after Christmas, Lupe Murguia and I tried to get hired at Gallo vineyards near Livingston, but were told they were not hiring any new workers. I was relieved because I knew I could not pretend to know how to do the skilled work on young vines that was the only work available in the dead of winter, but Lupe was disappointed. The two of us drove back to Modesto through the early-morning fog, and soon he was assigned elsewhere.

During the winter when work was scarce, the worker-minister teams regularly met in Delano or Porterville, sharing experiences, giving the Anglos practice in Spanish, and on occasion, picking oranges together. That spring I was assigned to do some recruiting for the student summer program, which was sponsored by the union instead of the Migrant Ministry. I reviewed applications, interviewed students throughout California, and sent my lists and notes off to Delano. I never heard who had actually joined the project or how they had worked out; it was one of those follow-up pieces that fell through the cracks.

My last foray into the fields was picking boysenberries on a crew with some farmworker friends in early June. My relationship with Frank Sample had thrived in spite of my long days/hours in the fields and my naming of him as my *navio* (little boat) instead of my *novio* (sweetheart) to the other worker-minister teams during a writing assignment in Spanish. When we gathered up the courage to marry, which included my taking on his three teenage daughters, I hauled them all off to my last CMM retreat at Bob Mathias Camp and bid a bittersweet farewell to my active years of ministry with farmworkers.

After our marriage, I shifted gears and became an on-call UFW supporter. I picketed local supermarkets during various boycotts, joined a picket line or two on trips to Delano, accompanied Frank when he took a turn at the optometry clinic in Delano, and helped form a local Friends of the Farmworkers group, for which I wrote occasional newsletters about local organizing efforts and boycotts. I was delighted when Bob Fitch's powerful photo display of Kern County sheriff's deputies beating up strikers was featured at our county library, and joined the protest when the display was abruptly closed down under pressure from Gallo and other powerful grower interests. I did some of the local organizing for the March on Gallo in 1975, marched with my husband and four-year-old son, and hosted Cesar and his security contingent, including the dogs Boycott and Huelga, in our home the night before the march. I tried to connect with UFW staff when they were assigned to staff offices organizing efforts near Modesto, and I made some fine friends.

From the beginning of my connection to the UFW, I was aware that there would be many opportunities to become more deeply involved in organizing or staffing boycotts. I always sensed that full commitment to the UFW cause would require more of my time, energy, and spirit than I was willing to give, and I kept my involvement at a rather safe distance. By the late 1980s, I knew that the union had used up, chewed up, and spit back out several people I loved and respected. Through their pain, disillusionment, and anger, I became aware of Cesar's and the union's shadow side, and I was glad I had not jumped in as deeply

as others had. At that point I took Cesar off the pedestal I had placed him on, and did a lot of pondering about the hidden human wreckage within the UFW and many other important movements. Evidently, movements that are committed to bringing about justice in the world do not necessarily operate justly within. One more lost illusion.

And still, a piece of my heart still leapt when I saw a UFW flag, met a farmworker whose passion and creativity were unleashed by the movement, or read about another union victory. Tears flowed as soon as I heard about Cesar's death, and I knew I needed to join that final procession through Delano, to honor that amazing, visionary, dedicated, and very humanly flawed man. It was a powerful experience, and I felt privileged to be a part of it.

A few years ago, when our county's office of education announced it was planning an event to honor Cesar Chavez' life, I felt pulled to become involved, if only to "keep it from being only an inch deep." With others from the Modesto Peace/Life Center, I offered to create a display of the life and vision of Cesar Chavez for the event. I spent countless hours gleaning materials from my own aging piles and files, and creating a series of display boards depicting Cesar's life and the history of the movement, with a focus on local connections. On the day of the event, I was deeply moved to see Latino families walking their children through our display and softly telling them, "This is the work your grandparents did. Honor it." An old man spent a long time looking at the pictures and reading the captions, then said, "This makes me proud to have been a farmworker." When young would-be gang members stole my treasured Gallo March T-shirt from the display, I wanted to yell, "How dare you desecrate this eagle, this enduring symbol of nonviolence and justice for farmworkers, by claiming it for your violent gang purposes?" The event was another powerful experience, and I have been proud to haul our display boards to two other such events.

And when I read *Gathering the Sun* by Alma Flor Ada and Simón Silva to the preschool children in my classroom, the old passion and hope wells up in my heart and catches in my throat as I read:

Cesar Chavez
your steps no longer cross the dusty fields
where your strong voice once shone
yet your example
and your words
sprout anew in the field rows
as seedlings of quiet hope.

I am glad I was privileged to see so many farmworkers become empowered through their commitment to the UFW, and I believe in my deepest heart that good work done in the direction of justice is never lost. I'm glad I got to meet folks from all walks of life whose imagination and passion for justice were captured by Cesar Chavez's vision. I'm proud to have been part of *La Causa* for awhile, even though I was never as deeply immersed as

some. I still claim as real the hope, vitality, and spirit that were part of the struggle, and claim as vitally important the damn hard, blessed work I know it was, and continues to be.

Seeing Cesar Chavez through a more realistic lens, and even occasionally allowing myself to feel cynical about his leadership, or about some of the union's internal workings and strategies, does not tarnish my memory of the work of empowerment and justice-making I was privileged to be on the edge of so many years ago. *Viva La Causa!*