

Maria Saludado Magana 1965–1980

It was 1957 when my parents decided to move the entire family to the United States. Four sisters and two brothers came with our parents to this country as American citizens. My father had been born in Arizona.

Immediately we began to work as farmworkers. My sister Dora, my mother, and I worked in a ranch in the area of San Diego. The owner was Japanese. The ranch was big and had many workers, the majority braceros. As braceros, they were provided housing. To cover the cost of housing, they started work 10 minutes early and left 10 minutes late. Because we worked with the braceros, we too began work at 6:50 a.m. and left at 6:10 p.m., instead of 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. We worked 10 hours at 70 cents per hour and made \$7 per day.

Quickly I realized that life was not going to be easy for me. I was the oldest of the sisters and felt a responsibility to help my parents. There was no hope for me of going to school like I had in Mexico.

My father's cousins who lived in the area of Delano invited him to join them, so we moved to the little town of Earlimart outside of Delano. I began work harvesting sugar peas, a little cotton, and then oranges. I worked the sugar beets with a short-handled hoe and got paid so little that we made \$9 among three persons over two days. We worked the cotton with long-handled hoes and the pay was better. We then started working with grapes in the different operations they call for (thinning, pruning, tying, etc.) and we harvested and packed the table grapes. If they were wine grapes, we harvested them and put them in boxes or gondolas and sometimes in cans. I harvested all types of grapes in all of these different ways.

I would sometimes become sad for my parents, thinking they would become old and they would have no way to support themselves. I saw very old people working the fields without any hope or help. At that time there was no Social Security for farmworkers.

It was April of 1964 when Cesar Chavez came to Earlimart to do a house meeting. My parents went and thought the meeting was interesting. They invited Cesar to have a house meeting in our house the next week. My father told us to invite our aunts and uncles and friends so that there would be a lot of people. This way, Cesar would see that we were interested in having a union. We helped people with transportation. When I finally got home for the meeting, the house was full and I could not see Cesar's face. I could only hear him speaking. Cesar had a manner of speaking with sincerity that gave you plenty of confidence. My parents immediately became dues-paying members. The dues at that time were \$3.50 per month, \$10.50 per quarter.

On September 14 in 1965, somebody came knocking at our door. It was Dolores Huerta. My parents had mentioned her name often but I just let her come in to speak with my parents. My sisters and I were busy getting dressed to go out because it was a Saturday and

we were going to a dance. The next day, Sunday, my dad told us that they had talked and we were going out on strike. *Vamos ir en huelga*. It was the first time I had heard talk about a strike. We were going to a meeting to find out what we had to do the next day at work. I didn't pay much attention at first because we would be going to work as usual, but my father said it was our responsibility to not let anybody enter the fields to work.

We had no picket signs. We just spoke with everybody. Our entire crew of 80 workers at Paguiarulo stayed out, leaving only the mayordomo. The great majority of crews walked out that week. The next week the mayordomos began visiting houses to get the workers back to work.

There were bad feelings between those who went back to work and those who stayed out on strike. Friends and even families were split over the strike, not speaking to each other. We made the decision to stay on strike until a contract was signed. There was a group of single women who stayed together. There was Gloria Moreno and her sister, Imelda, Maria Gutierrez, and my sister Antonia (Tonia) and I. We often traveled in the same car.

Volunteers started coming to help us. Cesar realized that the strike would not be won with picket lines in the fields when police started their arrests. The volunteers began to take us to the cities to tell people about our strike. The strikers were uneasy in the cities. I was more comfortable when going with a group of workers—with my group of friends. By myself, I felt sad. On my first trip to Los Angeles, I was with my sister Tonia. She and I were also taken to San Francisco. We often did not eat because we had no money. The Christmas in 1965 turned out better than we had hoped. We received presents when we had expected nothing, because caravans started coming to Delano to bring what they could do to support the strikers.

It was 1966 and we continued the picket lines. It was a cold March when it was decided that we were going to do a march to Sacramento to tell people about our strike. I liked the idea of the march, but I did not like the idea of being away from home. We started the march, returning home at night until Merced, after which we stayed together on the march, sleeping where we could, until we reached Sacramento. We received good news that the company Schenley had agreed to negotiate a contract with its workers. That was good for us because my father returned to work as an irrigator with that company and our family's financial situation improved. My sister Tonia and I stayed with the Huelga.

Fred Ross, Sr. joined us in Delano with other volunteers. Fred trained a group of us to do house meetings. We would picket the fields during the day and go to house meetings in the evenings with those who were breaking our strike. This same year, 1966, a campaign was begun against DiGiorgio, a very large company with ranches throughout the state of California—from Borrego Springs to Delano to Yuba City. I worked on this campaign in Arvin. The company supervisor, Marquez, would abuse me, yelling things to me from the time I arrived until I left. He would yell so that the workers would not hear us. In this campaign, I met Kathy Lynch, now Kathy Murguia. This experience only made my

commitment to continue stronger. When the company found that the workers were signing authorization cards with the union, it fired all the workers and brought new workers from such places as Tijuana, Mexicali, and Ciudad Juarez. We were sad when this happened, but Cesar and Fred called us to tell us we were going to start another large campaign of passing out leaflets called *El Mosquito Zumbador* (*The Buzzing Mosquito*).

My mother and my Aunt Amelia (Cadena) went to speak with Cesar and asked him if it would not be a good idea to bring the Virgen de Guadalupe to the picket line and do a 24-hour vigil until some agreement was worked out. Cesar agreed if they were in charge and they agreed to do so. The vigil started and continued while we passed out the leaflets. The people who brought the workers were told to keep the bus windows closed, but the workers began to open the windows to accept the leaflets we threw into the bus. The workers started talking with us, asking us questions. The women began to join the vigil. We had a historic election at DiGiorgio and it became the first election we won.

After the victory we continued the picket lines. All our experiences had made us stronger and less fearful. Men started following the trucks from the fields to see where the growers were taking their grapes. One afternoon the two picket line captains, Ezequiel Carranza and Pete Cardenas, asked our group if we would be willing to follow one of two trucks to see where they were taking the Giumarra grapes. They planned to follow the second truck so that picket lines could be set up wherever the grapes were taken. We followed the one truck up the Grapevine (the mountain pass from the San Joaquin Valley south on I-5 towards Los Angeles) as they made a number of turns. The truck finally stopped. We closed the windows as we had been instructed, leaving only a slight opening. The driver did not seem like a bad person, so we answered his question as to why we were following him. He answered that he also had his problems and told us where they were taking the grapes for storage. The full campaign with Giumarra started in 1967. I was again one of the persons who was on the picket line during the day and in house meetings in the evening. There was so much work, we had no time off.

In July of 1967, Cesar called us to a meeting and told us we were going to Chicago, without asking us if we wanted to go. I did not like the idea. I was quiet at first, fearful because I did not speak English. I went home and told my parents what Cesar had told us. Because Hispanics did not let their daughters out of the house until they married, I did not think they would let me go. Imagine my surprise when my dad said children were like birds who are sent out of the nest to fly so that they could learn about themselves and develop confidence. I asked my mother what she thought. She said I had my five senses. If blind persons and mutes are able to go out, I with my five senses complete could go out. God will guide and help you, she told me. We started packing, but we had little to take after two years on the picket lines.

We left on a Friday in August, dressed for hot weather in Delano. We traveled day and night and arrived in Chicago on Sunday morning. The person in charge was Eliseo Medina, who was 19 or 20 years old. He had gone ahead of us and found a small place for us to stay

on 18th Street above a Mexican bakery. We had no money to speak of, so we would just smell the bread baking. The family with whom Eliseo had stayed on arriving had donated three sets of plates, cups, spoons, and a pan for cooking. We first went to see where the grapes were shipped to in Chicago and then we had a planning meeting. We were to get \$5 pay and \$5 for food per week for each person. We assigned different responsibilities to each person. Mine were to manage the food money, cooking, and working with the Hispanic community. I told them that with that money, we could afford only one meal per day until we found people who would donate food to us.

I met a young seminarian who spoke Spanish and I invited him to come to our picket line. He met us the next day at 4 a.m. at the distributorship. Six of us had to share two cups of coffee. Later we went to the office. That afternoon, we invited him to eat with us—to share our eggs and bread and water, which was all we had. The seminarian spoke with his parents, telling them how poor we were. His parents invited us to eat and gave us more plates so that we did not have to eat in shifts. We all went to eat together as Eliseo had made the point that if anybody was invited anywhere, the invitation had to be for everybody.

There was a day when we came home and we had nothing to eat. Eliseo joked that now we would learn who was the best organizer. I had seen a Catholic Church where the priest was from Spain. Tonia and I went to see the priest and told him about what we were doing and how we had no money or food. The priest was moved and sad because the money from the collections had already been deposited. He pulled out close to \$6 from his pocket, all the money he had. We stopped at a store called La Casa del Pueblo and I bought three loaves of bread, eggs, beans, and a little flour. I used a bottle to make tortillas because we did not have the roller used to make tortillas.

We did the picket line early in the morning, but after a review of the situation, we decided that it might be best to do the picket lines later in the day. We found that some days, like Wednesdays and Fridays, seemed to be better to catch people like priests, nuns, and other supporters when they did their shopping. We also decided it would look better and make us feel better if we sang union songs. People were asking us questions, supporting us by joining the picket line, and agreeing to not shop there. The owner of the distributorship became angry one day and called the police because of the singing. We agreed to stop singing but we began to whistle the songs loudly. The policeman returned but we told him we were whistling, not singing. He just stood there scratching his head. By the day before Thanksgiving in 1967, we were able to set up a large picket line with our regular supporters of priests and nuns, ministers, and students that covered the main entrance.

In December we were told to return home to Delano to visit our families and for a meeting to be held with all the grape boycott staff. We met on the first of the year in 1968 and were told that everybody on the boycott was going to New York. Our group included Joe Cerda, the driver, and his daughter Helena; Eliseo Medina; Marcos Munoz and his wife and son; Ed Chiera; Alfredo and Juanita Herrera; and my sister Tonia. There were others

but I do not remember their names. We took off in a school bus that the Denver staff had been given. The bus was cold as the heater did not work. We stayed in churches on the way, but when we arrived in New York everybody was sick. But we were better off than we were when we arrived in Chicago because of the Seafarers' union. This union and its president, Paul Hall, were 100 percent supporters of Cesar and did everything they could to help us. We drove in six new cars they rented for us, driven by chauffeurs they provided. My chauffeur was Puerto Rican so that he could help me communicate.

I made a decision to learn English. Ed Chiera was very good to me and said he would be my teacher. Every morning I would get up early to begin learning at 6 a.m. I usually had my class with Alfredo Herrera and another person whose name I do not remember. But my classes only lasted a few weeks. I worked in New York as an organizer. I took my leaflet to the *Diario de New York*, the Spanish newspaper, but did not know how to use the elevator. I looked for a dark-skinned person to ask them if they spoke Spanish and to get their help. They invited me to come back and later Tonia and I had our pictures in the paper.

In April of 1968 a group of six of us led by Eliseo Medina was sent back to Chicago. I again worked with the Hispanic community with the help of people like Father Gallegos of La Iglesia de Guadalupe and Francisco Chico of the Ironworkers, setting up picket lines and getting financial support. There was a group of young Puerto Ricans who called themselves Revolutionary Youth (*Juventud Revolucionaria*) and set up picket lines to support us. They did the work themselves, but I would check to see that there was no trouble, though they knew we were a nonviolent movement. There was a newspaper called *El Informador* that was run by a young Cuban who supported our cause. We also set up a picket line by the University of Chicago with students who were supporters. One problem I had during this time is that on one picket line I put my purse down with a stack of leaflets and lost my purse with my immigration papers.

At the end of 1968, we spent Christmas in the home of Dr. Pedro Prieto, a Mexican doctor, and his family. The beginning of 1969 brought us good news from the boycott that moved us to work harder to deal with larger companies such as Jules, National Tee, and Kroegers. People were refusing to buy and eat grapes. It seemed a miracle that in Catholic and Protestant churches we were allowed to speak to the congregations. After the service, people would speak to us and tell us they supported us. We would tell them it was good to support us, but the most important thing was to not eat grapes.

In May of 1969, Eliseo Medina told me we had to divide our group in two. Because I was the most experienced, he wanted to put me in charge. He wanted to send me to Indianapolis where there were few Spanish-speaking people. I still did not have my immigration papers. When I received my papers in June, I agreed to go to Indianapolis where Eliseo told me I was to be met by a Mrs. Anderson. I pictured an older, overweight woman. On the bus I gave my button to a young Chicano serviceman from Texas. Later I learned my button was to be my identification for Mrs. Anderson.

It turned out that Mrs. Anderson was young and thin, not like I had pictured her. Her name was Karla and her husband Dan was coordinator of the Indiana support group, a group of eight. They were all people who worked and spent their evenings as farmworker volunteers. We had a meeting with A & P Jules, which agreed to remove grapes. But there was still Kroegers. I told our people I would fast for 10 days and that was how we were able to negotiate with Kroegers.

Around this time Cesar was doing a tour of the country and meeting with boycott staff. I met Cesar in Chicago, where he was with his wife, Helen, Esther Uranday, and his guards. They had decided to move me to Philadelphia. Cesar said the boycott was going well and if we continued the way we were going we would be victorious soon. Days before Thanksgiving, I moved to Philadelphia and spent the holiday with Hope Lopez, Tonia, and Carolina Franco, fasting and passing out leaflets.

Carolina Franco and Mike Vasquez were married soon afterwards in Boston in December of 1969. My father let me know that my brother Pancho would be married in February of 1970, and that he wanted the whole family to be there. My sister Tonia then told me she was going to be married to somebody she met in New York on the boycott. Her fiancé said he had no problems going to Delano. The union paid for my expenses to go back to Delano. The day after the wedding, I was told that I had to go back to New Jersey that day with Jim Drake. My young sister Celia went with me, but she quickly became ill and returned home to Delano. I was determined to stay to the end, but in June we received good news. By July the grape boycott was over and we stayed just long enough to thank all our supporters.

Cesar said that although the grape boycott was over, the union still needed people. We had valuable experience, but he would allow us to make our decision. The pay would remain at \$5 per week. The majority of people stayed with the union, but we returned to California. At that time the lettuce workers heard that the grape workers had won a contract with the union. They too went out on strike and the organizers all went to Salinas except for me. When I saw Cesar I was sad and asked him if I was not sent to Salinas because I was not a good organizer. Cesar laughed and took me to the RFK medical plan. He said he wanted me to learn how it worked. When I told him that I did not know how to work in an office, he laughed again and said I had not known how to organize and do a boycott but I had done a good job. He told me he wanted me to be able to answer his questions about the medical plan.

I had been working for the medical plan about three months when Cesar told me he wanted to make a presentation about how the medical plan worked. I had been working mainly on assisting workers in completing their insurance applications, so I had not learned all that Cesar wanted me to learn. After the meeting he asked me in a serious manner what had happened, that I was not learning what I needed to know. LeRoy started giving me work to study at home and I became determined not to disappoint Cesar. I was fortunate

to have great teachers, LeRoy for the medical plan, Jim Drake for the boycott, Fred Ross for organizing, and Cesar on nonviolence.

The day came when Cesar asked me again to make a presentation to workers on how the medical plan worked. By this time I knew how it worked and had even memorized some of the Social Security numbers of some of the workers. Cesar was so impressed that when my parents came to visit me Cesar told them he was very proud of me. My father later asked me what I had done to make Cesar so proud of me. I told him I was doing a good job.

It was in 1971 that the union moved its headquarters from Delano to La Paz (by the city of Keene between Tehachapi and Bakersfield). The medical plan staff was made up of LeRoy Chatfield as administrator and Patty Heinrich as his assistant. The staff—Maria Rifo, Ruth Clark, Ann McGregor, and many others who helped us when we needed it—processed claims. By 1972 we had the grape companies, the lettuce companies, the wine companies, and the citrus workers under Coca-Cola. We had a membership that was probably about 80,000 workers. We serviced the workers without computers and typed out all the checks on old electric typewriters.

The year of 1972 brought good news and bad news. That year a group came up from San Diego consisting of Carlos and Linda LeGerrette, Juan and Berlinda Lopez, and Ralph Magana. They had supported the boycott in San Diego and were volunteers making the same \$5 per week. LeRoy brought Ralph to me, telling me he was going to work on the RFK accounting and I should teach him how the plan worked. I spoke English with him and did not learn he spoke Spanish until Maria Rifo told a colorful joke in Spanish, saying that these people don't speak Spanish and I didn't need to worry. Ralph said that he was Mexican and spoke Spanish. From that time on I spoke only in Spanish with Ralph.

Some time afterwards Cesar called me to his office to tell me he was sending Patty to Florida to open a new office there because there were more workers there speaking English than Spanish. I needed to learn Patty's job as LeRoy's assistant. But as usual, things moved really fast so that there was little time to learn. Cesar had to go to Arizona and then called LeRoy to go to Arizona with him because he was going to go on a fast. I was nervous as to who I could go to if I had any questions. Checks also had to be signed, and at that time they were signed by hand. LeRoy told me to send checks and claims to Arizona where he could review them and have the checks signed. That was how the year ended.

Everybody returned to La Paz, but again Cesar sent LeRoy out, to Los Angeles, and we were left without a leader. The RFK Plan staff were good people dedicated to doing a good job. In October we received a visit from auditors who were there to review our work. I was so nervous I could hardly sleep. I went to Cesar to tell him how nervous I was, but Cesar told me I knew my job and there was no reason to worry. The auditors gave us a very good review and they congratulated me and my staff. Cesar came to the office to congratulate us and told me that he had told me we had nothing to worry about. I told Cesar that God always watches over me. Cesar said God watched over him too.

By this time Ralph and I had become good friends and he proposed to me in December while I was sick with my asthma. I joked that he was doing it because I was going to die. I am six years older than Ralph. For that reason, I hesitated to accept his proposal at first, but then I agreed, and we were married in Earlimart in March of 1973.

That same year we lost the contracts and everybody went on strike again, including my parents, uncles, aunts, and sisters. My mother was one of the many arrested. I felt sad because nothing seemed to have changed for farmworkers. Workers were injured and two became martyrs to the cause in nearby Arvin. The good news was that my son Emilio was born in October.

My son was my greatest joy that year. Cesar sent LeRoy to Los Angeles to direct the boycott there. My fellow workers and I were again without a leader. Later LeRoy told us he was moving to Sacramento with his family where his parents lived. Cesar spoke with Ralph and Ralph took over as administrator of the medical plan. We had lost the great majority of the table grape contracts, but we still had the wine companies, Coca-Cola, and some of the vegetable contracts.

In June of 1976 my second son, Alejandro Cesario, was born. I continued working; my sons were taken care of at Casa de Nana, a daycare program in La Paz outside of our office. My in-laws started to ask us when we were going to move down to San Diego so that they could be near our growing family. My third son, Julio, was born in August of 1978 and I was asked again when we were going to move out of the union to San Diego. Two years later we left the union for San Diego.

Cesar was not happy. You are forgetting your commitment, your responsibility, he told me. I answered that I now had another responsibility, one to my sons. I told him that when they grew up, perhaps we would return.

When Cesar died, we went to the funeral. I stood there a while speaking with Cesar, telling him that I had not forgotten my commitment. When my youngest son, Julio, was ready to graduate in 1996 and go on to Berkeley, Ralph and I agreed we would return to the union. Ralph went first and I joined him after Julio's graduation from high school.

I started working with the medical plan and the Juan De La Cruz Pension Plan so that I could go to the fields and explain to the workers how the plans worked. In 1997 I went to Salinas as an organizer on the strawberry campaign. The next year I was diagnosed with leukemia. The leukemia is in remission and I am back with Ralph working with the union in the financial management office in La Paz. Last year we walked with Arturo Rodriguez, Dolores Huerta, and others to Sacramento to get Governor Davis to sign legislation still needed for farmworkers. My sons are not with the farmworker movement, but they are working for *La Causa* as an organizer in one case, as a school counselor in the second case, while the third son is still in school so that he too can carry on the cause. My Aunt Amelia

is fighting cancer, but continues to do what she can to support the union. My parents are now with Cesar in heaven, watching what they started.