

Alfredo Acosta Figueroa 1965–1979

My involvement and interest in organizing farmworkers and organizing for the betterment and development of the downtrodden came at an early age due to my parent's descent, background, and activities. In other words, I was born into a family that had always fought for social justice.

I was born in Blythe, California, on August 14, 1934, to a family of four brothers and one sister. My mother, Carmen Acosta Figueroa, was born in Arizona and our family goes six generations deep in the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) Reservation along the Colorado River.

My mother was of Pima-Opata-Chimahuevo descent and my great-great-grandmother, Teodosia Murrieta Martinez, was Joaquin Murrieta's cousin. She rode with him during his guerrilla campaign against the injustices to the Mexican-Indian population by Anglos during the California Gold Rush of 1849.

My mother was the matriarch of her family and a midwife to families in Arizona and California. Our house was also like a service center here in El Barrio (neighborhood) Cuchillo of Blythe. She was one of the few women who could speak English and Spanish, as well as some Mojave. My father, Danuario Gomez Figueroa, came from El Rio Yaqui in the state of Sonora, Mexico. He fiercely protected his independence, being of Pima-Yaqui descent. My father was involved with the International World Worker Union (IWW) in the Arizona mines strikes of Jerome, Ray-Sonora, and others. His nickname was "El Chapo Danuario, El Huelguista del Ray, Arizona."

My grandfather was involved in the Cananea, Sonora mine strike of 1906. The Cananea mine strike is credited as the beginning of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. My father instilled in my brothers and me the philosophy that "your boss is your biggest enemy" and also that we should always share with others. He also taught us that the biggest crime was to deny workers a just wage. When I started to work in the mines as a young child, we were called Dan Figueroa and Sons. Later, when he got sick with miner's silicosis, we became known as the Figueroa Brothers.

We were always fighting the gringos growing up in El Barrio Cuchillo. My brother Miguel was Southern California's Wrestling C.I.F. Champion, and Gilbert was known as "El Asote" in boxing. He never lost a fight. We had to be taught to survive and not capitulate to the Anglo abuses in our schools, jobs, and other places.

Being raised in this humanistic atmosphere made it easy for me to join the civil rights movement. Our political activities began blossoming on a larger scale during local elections in the late 1950s, and within the Democratic Party during John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960.

During the late 1950s, Blythe was known as “Little Mississippi” because of its racial discrimination and Anglo-dominated power brokers, growers, teachers, police, INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service), etc.

The bracero program began during World War II. The program was an agreement between the U.S. and Mexico as a wartime program to help the national crisis in the field because of the labor shortage. It was during those long years that I felt the dire need for us to have a union in the fields.

While working in the harvesting of lettuce, watermelon, and other crops, I experienced firsthand the grave injustices committed against the Mexican braceros and local Chicanos.

I had always wanted to help organize the Mexicans because of the stories that were told to us of the U.S.-Mexico War, the gringos stealing our land, mines, etc. The civil rights movement in the South was in full swing. In Los Angeles people like Bert Corona, Edward Quevedo, and others were on the move, and I was just waiting for the first opportunity to join in and help.

My First Involvement in the Agriculture Worker Organizing Committee in 1960

In the latter part of 1959, the Agriculture Worker Organizing Committee (AWOC) began the campaign to organize the workers in the lettuce farms of the Imperial Valley. When the lettuce harvest was over in the Imperial Valley, the union had plans to follow the harvest to the Palo Verde Valley and strike during the spring harvest.

I met with some of the volunteers from El Centro who came to Blythe and they informed me of the farmworkers’ strike that was scheduled to begin in the Palo Verde Valley in February of 1960. In fact, one of Cesar Chavez’s cousins from Yuma gave me a flyer and an update of the happenings at the El Centro strike. My brother Miguel and I would continue to travel to El Centro to check out the activities.

We met with the strike coordinator, Clyde Knowles, to prepare for the upcoming Palo Verde Valley Strike. The main purpose of said strike was to draw attention to the unemployment of local Mexicans in the U.S., and to expose the injustices that the bracero program was causing, such as economic chaos in rural towns with large Mexican populations.

Yet the strike turned violent when the Imperial County sheriff deputized all of the growers, foremen, and other company officials, who then began burning the AWOC organizers’ cars. There were hundreds of beatings and arrests of the strikers with no intervention by officials. The locals retaliated by burning some bracero labor camps and then placing the blame on the braceros. The locals blamed the braceros for all the problems in the fields. The outcome was a no-win resolution. The strike was eventually defeated after

pressure from the Kennedy Administration, which did not want an international conflict with Mexico.

The strike never came to Blythe, but my brother and I suffered the consequences. Due to our involvement, Miguel lost his position as postmaster here in Blythe, and local growers and city officials threatened our whole family. We were called in to the farmers' and merchants' bank, where growers, Blythe police, and city officials were all in attendance. The head of the growers' association told us that they had heard that we had been down to the Imperial Valley. He told us that they were using guns down there, and that it was best for us to go about our business of working in the mines. If we needed a loan they could give us one, but for us not to get involved with AWOC

My brother eventually won his suit against the post office and he retired after 32 years.

Past History of Chavez and Figueroa Family Relationship

Before Cesar Chavez began the National Farm Workers Association in 1962, I was working in the mines with my father and brothers. We had met Cesar Chavez and his wife, Helen Fabela, casually when we would go to Delano to pick grapes and pitch watermelons. During the early 1950s, our next-door neighbor here in El Barrio Cuchillo, Claro Gonzalez, married Helen's sister Teresa Fabela. Claro and Teresa lived in Blythe for a while, and then moved to Delano. When we would go to Delano, we would visit with our friends, and that is when we met the Chavezes.

Later on, Cesar and I compared notes of our family background and found out that Cesar's father and grandfather used to board at my great-great-grandmother's boarding house in the mining town of King of Arizona (Kofa). The King of Arizona is in between Yuma, Arizona and Blythe, California.

Lucil Gonzales of Peoples Market in Delano is Claro's brother. Lucil came down to Blythe in 1964 and he told me that Cesar Chavez was starting up a Mexican farmworker union. At that time I told him, "If AWOC-AFL-CIO did not succeed in 1960, with all the financing and organizing skills they had, how could Cesar Chavez—without any financing or national organization—succeed?" I was in great doubt that Cesar could organize a Mexican union. He proved me wrong.

City of Blythe Lawsuit

In 1963, I was brutally beaten by three Anglo police officers from Blythe inside El Sarape Café, a restaurant in the Mexican section of town. During the lawsuit in the local justice of the peace court and later in the superior court, the local police and the district attorney constantly harassed all the members in my family, including my children in public schools and even my brother- and sisters-in-law.

Yet four years later, in April of 1967, I became the first Chicano in the history of the United States to win a police brutality lawsuit against a municipality: the city of Blythe.

The case became a cause celebre of the civil rights movement and I became a speaker at the ACLU forums. My case is in the 1970 publication of a report of the United States Civil Rights Commission, "Mexican Americans and the Administration of Justice in the Southwest."

The Beginning of the UFWOC Grape Strike

The bracero program ended December 31, 1964. The following year, the Filipinos began their strike in Coachella in June of 1965. The Filipino strike continued on up to the San Joaquin Valley, led by Larry Itlong of AWOC. He declared a general strike on September 8, 1965. Two weeks later, on September 15, the UFWOC went on its general strike.

When the UFWOC began the 1966 March to Sacramento from Delano, our MAPA members picketed Governor Pat Brown, who went to Palm Springs to play golf and avoid meeting with the marchers and Cesar Chavez.

When the Market Basket Grocery Stores boycott began, Elizar Risco came to Blythe to recruit boycotters. I would take them from Blythe to Indio because we could not get people from Indio to participate in the picketing. Later, I became a part-time organizer for the UFWOC when we met with Cesar Chavez at a conference in Santa Barbara in 1966.

Our MAPA Chapter had operated a service center in Blythe since 1965 and was organizing, informing, and educating the farmworkers of their rights to organize, gain citizenship, register to vote, etc.

In 1967 the organizing intensified in the vineyards of the Coachella Valley and the strike began with Manuel Chavez coming to lead it. At first, the people in Coachella were so fearful that even Manuel's brother, Val, refused to allow us to meet at his house in Coachella. Our group included Raul Loya, Jim Caswell, Ray Rodriguez, Paulo Carrizales, Manuel Chavez, and a few others. We then decided to meet at Loya's house. This was the first meeting held in Coachella to plan the strike.

Coachella Valley Grape Strike

I became very involved in the 1967 Coachella grape strike by helping the union in the Imperial Valley. I informed different groups of the need for their support in the union boycott and Coachella strike. On May 28, 1967, Cesar came down to the Indio Fairgrounds in Coachella. With MAPA's leadership by Bert Corona, community leaders, Mexican officials from Mexicali, and the Mexican CTM's representatives (Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos) were able to meet with Congressman John Tunney to receive his endorsement for the union boycott. It was also at that time that MAPA organizer Bernie Lozano and I composed the first corrido of Cesar Chavez, "*La llegada de Cesar Chavez al*

Valle de Coachella”. Unfortunately, it was an entirely different situation with Congressman Tunney the following year during the grape strike of July 4, 1968.

The Coachella Four Case

I had just gotten done with the Blythe PD lawsuit in 1968, when I got involved in the Fourth of July celebration in Coachella’s date land school protest. The farmworkers were protesting Congressman Tunney’s anti-boycott stance for the grapes.

Before the celebration, Bert Corona and Cesar Chavez had met with us at the Women’s Club of Coachella. It was decided there that Congressman Tunney should take notice that the majority of the Mexican farmworkers were in support of the UFWOC. We did not have a plan for conducting the protest and everything happened spontaneously. We left the meeting to join the hundreds of people who were at the park celebration. Cesar and Bert did not go with us.

When Congressman Tunney was about halfway through his speech and still refused to mention the grape strike (which was the biggest strike ever in California), I unraveled my large, personal flag that I always carried with me during the strikes. I raised the flag and held it over my head. Then all of the sudden, hundreds of farmworkers began clapping in unison and shouting “Huelga! Huelga! Huelga!”

Congressman Tunney and Coachella city officials became irate and enraged. They tried to raise the volume on the amplifier to drown out our “Huelga!” shouts, but the amplifier only became squeaky.

During his speech, the audio could not be heard, and the police were taking a lot of pictures of the crowd. When Congressman Tunney finished his speech, the crowd just mingled and stayed in the area. Within the next few days, the Coachella police department issued warrants for our arrests. They had identified four of us out of a crowd of 1000 or more people who were present at the rally. We were supposed to have been the leaders of the disruption at the rally. This case later became known as “The Defense of the Coachella Four.”

We were charged with disrupting a public assembly and sentenced to four months in the county jail. Jim Caswell, Tom Kay, Raul Loya and I were incarcerated on May 19, 1969. The county and state fourth District Appellate Court in San Bernardino concurred with the decision made by the justice of the peace in Coachella.

We were all shocked and could not believe what was happening. In Blythe, the police refused to arrest me. They called my brother Miguel and asked him to tell me to report to the Coachella city jail. They had already arrested the others.

The person least able to understand the jailing—and the one who felt the brunt of it—was Jim Caswell. He had come from Canada to the desert because of his health. He was a very good man and he was ill during incarceration. Both the sheriff of Riverside County and his personal doctor refused to give Jim his medication. Soon afterwards, he completely collapsed. He spent most of his two months in the hospital.

I remember that whenever I was singing and playing my guitar, he would ask me, “How can you be so happy?” And I responded, “For us Mexicans, it was part of our daily lives to be persecuted by the authorities.” Now that he had joined us, he too would have to suffer the consequences.

During our jailing, he would scream for his doctor and medical treatment, but it was to no avail. He weighed 340 pounds when we were first arrested. When we were released by the U.S. Supreme Court two months later, he weighed only 180 pounds. Jim Caswell died shortly thereafter. I had won another case, but my family had paid a high price. This case caused complete disarray in my family, and, most tragically, cost another man his life.

Congressman Tunney lost his bid for reelection due to the organizing against him by MAPA and other groups that existed in Southern California.

Consequently, due to the harsh sentencing and the gross violation of our constitutional rights by the justice of the peace in Coachella, it was legislated in California that the justices of the peace court system be abolished. It was also legislated that to be a municipal court judge, one had to be an attorney.

Citizen’s Arrest of Rancher Raymond Payne in Calexico in October of 1968

During one of the many trips to Calexico to participate in the boycott, an incident happened that could have gotten out of hand. In the fall of 1968, I would take groups of boycotters from Blythe down to picket the Safeway store in Calexico on weekends since we did not have an organizer or office there. It was during one of those weekends that we were attacked on the picket line in front of Safeway by an Anglo grower named Raymond Payne.

He started by taking the UFW flag from Max Ruiz and then hitting him with it. Part of the training that I gave to anyone who participated with us was the strict code of nonviolence. After hitting Max, he went after Frank Davila, grabbing his handouts and shoving him off the sidewalk. He then came directly toward me with his fist clenched, ready to strike me. I dodged him and grabbed him from behind.

I called out to Payne that he was under arrest and that I was making a citizen’s arrest on him. He was struggling, but we were able to subdue him. All the while he kept yelling, “You can’t arrest me you dirty Mexican, Red Communist...” and so on.

At that time a Calexico police car had arrived on the street across from the store. I knew the policeman, David Acuna, brother of Joe Acuna, the postmaster of Calexico and a MAPA member. I told David that I had made a citizen's arrest and I was turning Payne over to his custody to take him to jail.

David was shocked and asked me if I knew what I was doing. I said yes, and that if he did not take Payne, we would take him to the chief ourselves. David reluctantly placed him under arrest and took him to jail and I signed the complaint for assault and battery. Before the trial of Payne, I got calls from the district attorney's office to see if I was still going ahead with my demand.

During the trial our witnesses were not allowed to testify and I was reprimanded when I tried to relate the incident on the picket line. Judge Hayward was a racist who spoke Spanish and he had all of the Mexicans in Calexico intimidated. Calexico was 95% Mexican, yet the 5% Anglo population had full control of the power structure.

Raymond Payne was found guilty on some lesser charge and was reprimanded not to do that anymore and to avoid our picket lines. Raymond Payne and a bunch of his cronies came out of the courtroom laughing at us. They knew that Judge Hayward ruled in their favor.

This incident just reaffirmed our decision to continue our struggle in Calexico. I went to talk to the mayor and other members of MAPA to plan the ousting of the Judge during the next elections.

The Incarceration in Calexico

In the late spring of 1969, before the grape harvest, Bert Corona, two other organizers and I were arrested in Calexico for leafleting the thousands of daily commuters across the border. We started at 2 a.m., and we were informing the farmworkers that there was an ongoing UFW grape strike in the Coachella Valley, and to respect our picket lines.

A U.S. customs officer called the police, saying that we were illegally leafleting in the center island and blocking traffic outside the area of the port of entry. The other two strikers and I were arrested and taken to jail. The police refused to arrest Bert Corona because they had recognized him. Fortunately the mayor of Calexico was a member of MAPA and a strong supporter of the UFWOC. I was granted a phone call and I called Mayor Luis Legaspi at 3 a.m. at his home. He told the officers that we were within our rights and to release us immediately. The office of Jacinto Guerra was also reprimanded. We knew that the U.S. immigration department and the growers were working hand in hand.

The Indio-Mexicali March from May 10–19, 1969

In May of 1969, the UFW began the 100-Mile March from Indio to Mexicali along the Mexican border. The march began in Indio on May 10 and ended in Mexicali on the 19th.

My good friend Alfredo Vasques was in charge of the march and led it all the way to Calexico. The march was to draw international support and sympathy for the upcoming Coachella Valley grape strike and the international grape boycott campaign.

We had been meeting with some of the CTM leaders and inviting them to the Coachella Valley so they could see for themselves the damage that the daily commuters were causing to the UFW. We wanted a mutual understanding that we did not want to stop Mexican nationals from coming, but we did not want them as scabs either.

That year we had an extremely hot spring and we had many 100 degree days. It was a grueling nine-day trek. I had my guitar and I was singing nearly every day. Every time that we had a break along the road or in the afternoon, we would have an assembly and I was the person chosen to start off with song. We started with around 75 people, but when we got to Calexico, there were thousands of farmworkers, students, movie stars, and national political leaders with us.

During the march, I got a lot of publicity and international recognition. The Spanish-language edition of *Life* magazine had a big picture of me and other small pictures with my guitar on the march. At that time we also had a reporter from Rome, Furio Colombo, taking a lot of pictures, and we became good friends along the route.

I told him the story of the Coachella Four and that we were to report to the Riverside county jail after we finished the march on May 21. When we got to Calexico I could barely sing from exhaustion; my voice was gone. My guitar bulged from the sweat that had soaked into it during the heat of the days. The crowd understood and appreciated my efforts.

Before we left the big rally, Furio Colombo promised to send me a guitar so that I could continue organizing the poor farmworkers. I thanked him for his generosity, but I thought to myself, "Yeah, that is what they all say when they are with you and say good things about you."

After I got back to Blythe I reported to the Coachella city jail, then we were transferred to the county jail in Indio, and eventually to the Banning Road Camp, where we stayed until the Supreme Court released us. I was never forgotten while I was in jail. I always had visits from my wife and Pete Velasco, who at that time was heading the strike, and he would bring me cigars, which I greatly appreciated and enjoyed.

One Sunday when my wife came to visit me in the Banning Road Camp, she had a brand-new guitar with her and a letter from Furio Colombo. The guitar was a Guild, a very expensive one, similar to Elvis Presley's guitar. It was beautiful and had a wonderfully strong sound. I had never in my life had such an expensive guitar. All of my prior guitars were Mexican and were very delicate and could not withstand my heavy strumming. I still have that same wonderful gift that I received while I was in jail. Only today the guitar shows its long years of usage.

Afterwards I found out that Furio was the chief editor of Rome's largest newspaper. No wonder he was so generous and appreciative of our union struggle.

The Cough Syrup Case

The fanfare involved with the winning of our case in the State Supreme Court was still very vivid in our minds, and we had just had one of the most successful strikes in the Coachella Valley. In February of 1970, Professors Raul Loya and Ray Rodriguez, my brothers Mike and Gilbert, and I went to Mexicali to visit the schools there. We wanted a cultural exchange with the schools in Coachella and Blythe.

On our way back my mother had asked me bring her some eucalyptus cough syrup medicine. When we returned to the United States port of entry in Calexico, we declared our purchases to the INS officers and they referred us to customs. There a plain-clothes man started to smart off and I told him to identify himself. He pulled out his badge and I also showed him my identification. He said, "So you're Alfredo Figueroa." I replied that I was and he answered, "Well, you picked the wrong place to get smart."

They jumped my brother Gilbert and me, then dragged us into the office and threw us against the counter in a chokehold. I started to holler to the people in the office so they could see the assault that was taking place. The others in our party were told to not intervene. We were mugged and jailed in Imperial County and charged with drug smuggling of a cough syrup medicine.

At 4 a.m., Gilbert and I were secretly whisked out of the Imperial County jail in shackles from head to toe and taken by car to the San Diego federal jail. After our arraignment we were released, thanks to the intervention of Congressman Edward Roybal, Bert Corona, and Luis Legaspi. My brother Mike had gone to seek their aid. Nobody at the jail, the INS, or the federal magistrate in El Centro knew the whereabouts of the Figueras. We were held incommunicado all that time.

After our release, officials stated that they had kept it hush-hush because they expected a riot at the county jail if it was learned they had incarcerated the "famous" Figueroa brothers. We won our criminal case of drug smuggling because the Federal Court Judge ruled that it was ridiculous and a waste of taxpayer money to try and prosecute the cough syrup case.

During that whole time the newspapers had picked up the story and smeared our names. We sued the customs officers after seeking help from the ACLU and other attorneys who turned us down because customs officers had never been sued before in the history of the United States. I researched the court cases and some narcotics officers were being sued in *Bevins v. 6 Narcotics Officers*.

My attorney took the case in contention and Federal Court Judge Clifford Wallace ruled against the U.S. Customs officers and issued a memorandum opinion which now stands as *Figueroa v. Donald Quick, etc., Civil #71-65-CW*. The memorandum reads: "That with some reluctance, I hold that any violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution cannot be considered within the scope of the official duties of an officer of the Government; therefore, he has no immunity for such acts."

We sued the customs officers in a civil suit and lost. We found out later that some of the jurors were members of the notoriously racist Minute Men organization in San Diego County. When we found out it was too late, and they had a hung jury, only one juror voted in our favor. We had needed all six jurors in our favor to win. We were again busted and in debt up to our ears from attorney fees. Yes, we had our day in court and the officers were transferred from the Calexico port of entry to Tucson.

During the time that we were fighting the cough syrup case, Bert Corona, Abe Tapia, and my brothers were vigorously pursuing congressional support to investigate the hundreds of abuses and complaints made against the customs officers and the much-hated INS.

Finally, Congressman Edward Roybal ordered congressional hearings in San Diego to hear the complaints. *New York Times* investigative reporter Danny Welch's articles stirred up great interest among those in the civil rights movement. After the hearings and investigations, the chief immigration officer and other personnel from Calexico and the San Diego department were found guilty of fraud, taking bribes, and selling green cards to the immigrants. Many were incarcerated, fired, demoted, or transferred back East. The whole operation was called "Operation Clean Sweep."

Also, the Equal Employment Commission intervened because most of the customs officers were racist Anglos from Virginia and Texas. Since that time, the customs department and the INS began hiring Mexicans, blacks, and other minorities.

The First UFWOC Grape Contract

Finally, after three years of the Coachella Valley grape strike and the international grape boycott, we received our first grape contract. It was April 15, 1970, when Lionel Steinbergs, owner of the David Freedman Company, signed with the union.

It was a very historic day because it was the first UFWOC table grape contract ever signed. We had a big rally at the Coachella Park. After Cesar announced the big victory, the local Coachella Mexican club had a dance that erupted into violence. The Coachella city police attacked some members of the Brown Berets and arrested them under the pretext that they had not paid for their dance ribbons. As the evening wore on there was complete disruption with hundreds of people, mostly youths, milling in the streets. Cars were burned, and in the wee hours of the following morning, the home of Mayor Nick Abdonar was torched.

The people were fed up with the city fathers and the police department because they were always supporting the growers. Also we had just buried Jim Caswell and we all blamed the city council for his death.

The signing of the David Freedman contract gave us a big boost in morale because we were finally seeing the end of this long struggle. The 1970 Coachella Valley grape strike was not as violent, and now we had a union office that dispatched workers to work under the union contracts.

Salinas Strike of 1970

In the Imperial Valley, the union had a tentative agreement with Ben Abatti Farms during the strike of the May through June melon harvest. When the grape strike continued in the Delano area, I knew that victory was near with all the reports of the growers' financial losses. Finally on July 29, 1970, the majority of the Delano and Coachella Valley grape growers signed the agreement with the union. Thanks to the international grape boycott, the grape strike was the most effective campaign.

We had not even begun to savor the victory that had come at such a high price, when the word came that the Teamsters union was again making sweetheart agreements with the Salinas lettuce growers. All the union efforts were employed in the Salinas Valley. From Santa Maria to Watsonville, the biggest farmworker strike ever began against the growers that had signed these sweetheart agreements. More than 7000 farmworkers were on strike.

Full-Time Organizing in 1970

After a few months of the lettuce strike, Cesar called for a national boycott of lettuce. And the first contracts were signed with Inter Harvest, Freshpict, and other Salinas area growers. Yet in Blythe, we needed a full-time office and staff.

During the Coachella Valley strike and boycotts, I was just a volunteer organizer without pay. I was able to work at my family's rock quarry part time and then I would go back and forth to organize in the strikes and boycotts.

Thanks to my wife, who was working and taking care of the seven children we had at that time, I was able to participate in union activities. Cesar and Manuel Chavez could never get me to sign on full time until 1970, because I never wanted to leave my family in Blythe.

The UFWOC office that we had in Blythe was the current MAPA office through which our members operated the government OEO programs. It also served as a service center. I was in charge of the Blythe office and helped in Coachella and Calexico. We agreed to a proposed budget for the MAPA office and myself, but I told him that I couldn't be away from my family for a long time, 30 days at the most. Cesar wanted me to help during the strikes because I had been deeply involved in the organizing of the farmworkers. In

September, Richard Chavez came and signed me up as a full-time organizer. I had to tell my brothers that I was no longer going to work with them and that I had decided to go full time for \$5 a week, rent, and \$5 per child. I was instrumental in providing in-service training, not only to the farmworkers under contract, but also to the company supervisors as to the language in the contracts, grievance procedures, etc. Our first contract here in Blythe was with Freshpict Farms. Freshpict had brought out Wilco Farms, so I knew the owners and all the workers and foremen.

The company manager requested me to instruct his foremen about the contract, since it was the first time in history that there was an agreement that was being enforced by a union. It was a very amicable arrangement because the majority of workers were long-time employees of the company and longtime residents of Palo Verde Valley.

Freshpict was a subsidiary of the giant Purex Corporation and it had been given the word to accept the contract and not cause problems. Plus the company manager knew of my reputation in fighting for our civil rights. During the entire three years of the contract we never had a grievance that wasn't resolved locally. And, Freshpict was the only company that abided by the contract. The rest of the growers were defensive and violated their contracts at every opportunity.

As the lettuce boycott and strike intensified, we also became more militant and aggressive. We made a very dramatic demonstration during which Cesar was incarcerated in Salinas for his refusal to obey a superior court judge's ruling to stop the lettuce boycott in December of 1970. When Cesar was in jail, Manuel Chavez came down to Calexico and got us to send the Bud Antle Company a Christmas gift. A few days before Christmas, nearly 100 huelgistas gathered around the Bud Antle buses in Calexico and didn't permit any of the buses to leave the parking lot at Legaspi's gas station.

Even the workers who were on the buses were forced to get off, reluctantly. Bud Antle's whole lettuce harvest had come to a halt. This action was a major victory for the union because it was the first time in the history of Imperial Valley that we had completely paralyzed a company for a whole day.

The day before Christmas, Cesar was released from jail. He was gaining more support in jail than out. Coretta Scott King, Ethel Kennedy, and hundreds of other people visited him and there was a continuous 24-hour vigil throughout Cesar's incarceration.

We didn't continue with the same tactic against Bud Antle because the UFWOC wanted to let the company know that we had the people and the power to paralyze their operations, and not the Teamsters.

The whole campaign succeeded without the Calexico police or Imperial County sheriff intervening, unlike the AWOC strike 10 years earlier. Moreover, in Calexico we had a big MAPA movement going and the police and sheriff were also members.

The Signing of the First UFW Contract with a Grower in the Colorado River Indian Reservation

Stipulated in the UFWOC agreement signed with Freshpict in Salinas was a clause that stated that, outside of California, the union would have to conduct a vote by card signatures to verify if their workers wanted the UFWOC or not. We began the union card-signing campaign on the Colorado River Indian Reservation (CRIT). I was able to organize a group of young Native students to help me with the Native people who were working with Freshpict on the reservation.

This was no easy task since the tribal council was against the union. The growers, led by Bud Antle and Bruce Church, were the main lessees of the farmland on the reservation and were pulling the strings of the council. Because I'm a descendant of the Colorado River Nations, I have many relatives there and I knew a lot of people, and we were also recruiting for the universities' educational opportunity programs (EOP) in Chicano and Indian studies, which helped to facilitate my organizing. We were very successful in our endeavor and the cards collected were overwhelmingly in favor of the union. The tribal council could not dispute the results.

I took the cards to be counted in Yuma, Arizona, where the Catholic bishop's labor committee met with the company's representatives. I met Roger Mahony, now the Cardinal of Los Angeles. He was in charge of the card count.

I thought that in the near future we would have all of the major agribusiness growers in the reservation under union contract, but as it turned out, Freshpict was the only one. After our success with Freshpict, we were called to help Gus Gutierrez organize the Navajos in Peoria, Arizona.

Our local native committee was called Forgotten Indians Reaching Silently Together (FIRST) and it included Chimahuevos, Hopis, Navajos, and Hualapias. One of our FIRST members had been to the Alcatraz Island occupation and was working in the post office with my brother Miguel.

As we intensified our organizing in the reservation the following year, the tribal council became more hostile against the members of FIRST and their families. The tribal council threatened Hopi families whose children participated with exile from the reservation and confiscation of their property.

I was called to testify before the tribal council. I had to tell the council that the Hopi children were just friends of mine and that they were recruiting students for the universities, not the UFWOC. The council accepted my testimony and allowed the families to stay on the reservation. I took Cesar to make a presentation before the CRIT council the following year when the union began the campaign to recall Arizona governor Jack

Williams. We were voted down and ostracized by CRIT. It was the only reservation in Arizona that didn't support the recall. After the meeting, some of our old Mojave friends came out and apologized for the actions that they had taken.

Basic Vegetable Union Strike

Basic Vegetable Farms, a subsidiary of American Potato Company of Idaho, began its onion harvest season in May here in Blythe. The season continued in the Bakersfield-Wasco area in July and August, then went up to Crows Landing-Modesto and the Salinas Valley, before finishing up in Tule Lake in Northern California.

After receiving numerous complaints by the workers of the Teamster intervention, the UFWOC board decided to pursue a contract with the company.

Because most of the Basic Vegetable workers were from Blythe, I was authorized to do all the organizing from Blythe up to Tule Lake. When we organized our strike committee in Blythe, it was decided to go out on strike when the harvesting began in the Bakersfield-Wasco area.

The first days of the strike were very successful and we had about 90 percent of the workers on the picket line. I had recruited some locals and the Brown Beret chapter from Delano to help me with the first picket line. During the first weeks of the strike, the company recruited scabs from everywhere but they still had a hard time getting workers.

We even had a mass officiated at the edge of the onion field rows so that the giant onion machines couldn't turn around.

But when the company operations moved to the Salinas Valley, I had to recruit and organize the new workers because most of the original strikers from Blythe left for other jobs or headed back to Blythe. I was fortunate in finding some very good workers to help in running it, since at that time the lettuce strike was still in effect. During that same time the company began its harvest operation in two places, King City in the southern part of the valley and Salinas in the north. Nearly every day I would travel to all three strike zones to continue the pressure on the company.

When we began the strike in Bakersfield, I would go and sleep in La Paz, but then it got so far that I would go and sleep in the homes of the strikers.

When we were striking in King City we were able to contact some key workers at Basic Vegetable's processing plant, so that the workers there might vote to have a sympathy strike and join the packinghouse workers' union.

Afterward, we also decided to picket Basic Vegetable's main processing plant in Vacaville. It had a Teamsters union, but it wanted out.

Again, most of the workers were Chicanos and wanted to help the UFWOC. We had a group of young Chicanos who were helping to leaflet the workers and make them aware of Teamster sweetheart contracts and the treatment that the Mexican farmworkers received. We had pressure coming from all sides.

One day, I got a call from Jerry Cohen, the UFW attorney. He told me to bring a couple of members of our strike committee to meet him at the Teamster headquarters in Burlingame. We met there because Charles Hume, president of the Basic Vegetable Company, wanted to meet and have all sides present to sign a contract with the UFW.

Boy, did it feel good! I knew that the four-month struggle and sacrifice was going to bear fruit. I felt very strange when we walked into the big shiny Teamster headquarters; it was like walking straight into the lion's jaws. We met with the company's attorney and Teamsters to give them our proposed contract and they said they would contact us later.

It was now close to the end of September and we were striking in the area of Crows Landing. The strike was going great; we had an active ranch committee of young Chicanas and Chicanos from the Patterson labor camp leading the campaign. The union had gotten word that the company had refused to negotiate because Ronald Wilson Reagan, the governor of California, advised Hume not to sign the contract. He promised Hume that he was working on legislation to defeat the union and to resist the UFW efforts at all costs.

One day while we were on the picket line we were forced to scatter and flee for our lives. A pickup truck came straight at us and threw a military-type smoke bomb at us. Our security group on watch gave chase to the pickup and called the sheriff department. After the deputies came and arrested the man, it turned out that he was Peter Loren Dompe, 25, son of Frank Dompe, a prominent grower and member of the Stanislaus county fair board. We had other growers attempting to run down our strikers. After five days of constant threats and a lack of protection from the sheriff, La Paz decided to call off the strike.

Cesar called me and said, "The life of a farmworker is not worth the strike." After being arrested, Peter Dompe was not charged with a criminal complaint despite the picketing of our community group to pressure the district attorney in Modesto.

I returned to Blythe to begin organizing for the upcoming lettuce harvest. Some of the original Blythe strikers were upset with me because we didn't win a contract and they had been fired.

Campaign to Dissolve the Infamous Justice of the Peace Courts in California

The public outcry was so great after we (the "Coachella Four") won our case in the state supreme court in 1970 that we were able to get the CRLA, MALDF, and ACLU to lobby the state to dissolve the notorious and infamous state justice of the peace courts.

Petition drives were started in Blythe, Coachella, and the Imperial Valley, and we were able to submit thousands of signatures to the state. The justices of the peace did not have to have any education, much less a law degree, yet in the rural areas of California they wielded extreme power, always siding with the police, growers, and Anglo populations. In 1958 the Chicano community, led by the Figueroas, were able to kick out of office our racist justice of the peace, Judge Frank Anderson (who had only a seventh-grade education), the Mafioso chief of police, Herman Ditch, and the crooked mayor. We did this when we finally got tired of living under severe abuse and horrible living conditions and decided to do something about it. My wife, Demesia, and I worked for six months to register 600 new voters, which brought about this change in the Palo Verde Valley.

One of our main concerns was to remove Tom Cross, the hanging judge of Coachella, and Judge Hayward from Calexico. The state finally dissolved the justice of the peace courts, consolidating the different rural areas into municipal court districts and requiring judges to be credentialed attorneys. There was a great sigh of relief when the new law was enacted, but it came only because of Jim Caswell's death and our four-month jail sentence.

Blythe Melon Strike, 1970–1972

My mother, Carmen Acosta Figueroa, was a pillar of the Catholic church in Blythe, and she was a founding member of the Guadalupe Society. I was one of the five musicians who began the singing tradition of “The Mañanitas to the Virgen” in 1956. My father, uncles, and other Mexicans built the parish hall next to the church in the 1940s.

After we got married, my wife, Demesia, continued in the same tradition of association with the church as my mother. She was also president of the Guadalupe Society and in charge of the parish hall operation, renting it and afterwards cleaning it. She also taught catechism at the church and in our house in El Barrio Cuchillo.

All of our association and devotion to the church came to an abrupt halt when we began organizing the UFW Blythe melon strike, which divided the town. The hatred and racism against Mexicans—and especially the Figueroa family—was showing its ugly face.

Richard Chavez came to Blythe and met with us to call for a general meeting of the workers of the melon growers of Blythe. The melon strike was in full swing in the Imperial Valley when we had the general meeting with the melon workers in Blythe. The meeting was well publicized at the parish hall and it was voted to strike the Blythe growers if they didn't sign a union contract. I invited the local assistant pastor of the church and other local organizations of the community to come and show their support for the union.

The following week the priest, Ivan Fritzimmons, was reprimanded. The church made a public statement that it was not taking sides in the union struggle. The resident priest,

Richard Humphy, was the priest who the following year conducted his own elections together with the grape growers of Coachella.

When we struck the melon harvest, 85 percent of the workers walked off the job to join the picket line. We struck in the Palo Verde Valley in California and across the Colorado River in Arizona.

On the Arizona side the melon fields were adjacent to the Colorado River Indian Reservation. In the first days of the strike, we always had the presence of the Yuma county sheriff and the reservation police.

The tribal police were having target practice with their AK-47 machine guns across the road from us and they kept a 50-caliber machine gun mounted on a jeep nearby inside the boundary of the reservation. They would constantly harass us by driving their cars off the pavement toward the picket line to make us disperse. Then they would just sit there laughing at us.

One day a deputy sheriff who was a Mojave became impatient because we continued with the discipline on the picket line. He arrested my nephew, and then Dolores Huerta, because he said that they were obstructing the road leading to the melon field. When our young attorney, Noel Fidel, who was present, complained and questioned the officer as to why Dolores was arrested he replied, "Who are you?" and Noel said, "I'm her attorney." The officer got Fidel by the shoulder and said "Get your ass inside, you're under arrest too!" and shoved him inside the rear seat of the patrol car.

It took us some time before we finally we were able to find out that they had taken them to Parker and then transferred them to Yuma where they were released. (Noel Fidel is currently a federal court judge in Phoenix.)

The day after the arrest, Gilbert Levias, a police officer and a distant cousin of our family, was amazed that I was the local UFW organizer. He approached me and said that he wanted to talk to Cesar Chavez. I told him that he should go to our headquarters in Blythe to meet with Richard Chavez and our strike committee.

That night, according to Gilbert, nobody from the Indian police wanted to come with him. As a protocol, Gilbert called the Blythe police department. They offered a police escort, which Gilbert refused. He came by himself to meet with us. In the meeting he explained that the tribal council was very adamant in preventing the union from striking on the reservation—this despite the fact that we were not on the reservation land.

He told us how the superintendent of Bruce Church and the other growers were advising the Bureau of Indian Affairs to hype up and brainwash the police officers by showing them all kinds of propaganda about communists and the violence that the unions committed when they went on strikes. They said that the union wanted to take over the reservation.

Overall, Gilbert recommended that we should not go on the reservation to strike. I strongly supported his recommendation that we shouldn't strike on the Arizona side of the Colorado River, much less on the reservation.

Being a native of the area, I knew what to expect from the local tribal police and Yuma County sheriff. Our committee voted that we concentrate our union efforts on the California side where at least we would have minimal police protection.

The following day, armed guards patrolled the entrance to the CRIT reservation. We never did strike in the reservation, but we began an informative leafleting campaign inside the reservation's labor camps, and many of the melon workers just left the area to continue the melon harvest up north in the San Joaquin Valley.

The California side of the strike was very effective and we were able to get the packinghouse workers to shut down the packing sheds for a couple of days. The melons were rotting in the hot sun, and the company had to recruit high school students from Yuma who had never picked melons. The student scabs were a complete disaster for the growers.

Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez went and met with the growers. I thought that for sure we were going to win some contracts, but as it turned out, they were able to resist until the season ended, despite their tremendous losses.

The following year we again struck the melon fields, but now the growers were ready and had hired labor contractors who had professional scabs working with them. Overall the strike was good, but we didn't win again. During all the picketing, the growers themselves would be out on the lines arguing and yelling at our organizers during the extreme temperatures. Unfortunately, two growers had heart attacks and died. It was very depressing for them and they couldn't bear to see—for the first time in their lives—poor Mexican farmworkers stand up for their rights.

One time on the picket line, on the Palo Verde irrigation district canal bank, a grower pointed a shotgun right in of my face and threatened to kill me. Fortunately, the Riverside County sheriff, Commander Brickmore, was in the immediate area. I demanded that he advise Jack Marlow to put the shotgun down and go home before I had him arrested.

I told Mr. Marlow that I wasn't going to have him arrested because he had married Mrs. Mahoney, a widow who was a very good friend of my mother in the church and a very good Catholic. Reluctantly, he left and went to his house across the canal. He was 90 years old and I had worked for him hauling grain with our trucks years before. It was one of the times when I thought that I was going to get killed because he was trembling while holding the shotgun in front of my face, but we continued the picket line.

In 1972, with only a small group of loyal students and strikers during the melon harvest, we were still able to close down Cruz Camp, which housed 200 melon workers. We never got a contract from any of melon growers in the valley, however.

Escuela de la Raza Unida, the First Chicano Controlled Alternative Farmworkers School in Operation, May 1, 1972

When I returned to Blythe from the Napa Nine campaign, we were enforcing contracts from the lettuce boycott and fighting against a proposed law in Arizona that would outlaw the secondary boycott sponsored by Governor "One-Eyed Jack" Williams.

We had our UFW support group going full swing; Cesar even placed a Greyhound bus in my responsibility along with one full-time organizer and a professional bus driver.

In April of 1972 I was involved in the lettuce boycott in South Central Los Angeles when I got a personal call from Cesar, who said that they had been looking for me for the past three days. They had not located me since I didn't have a place to report while I was organizing among the unions and black and Jewish groups.

CBS was doing a UFW special in Los Angeles at one of the black churches and I was in charge of the entertainment when Cesar called and told me to leave everything and get back to Blythe immediately, because all hell had broken loose.

When I got back to Blythe, the majority of the Chicano high school students and some junior high school students had been on a school picket line for three days already.

My 14-year-old daughter, Patricia, had been violently manhandled by the junior high school principal in front of 60 other students. The students were having a MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) meeting during their lunch hour with their MEChA sponsor, who was showing an 8-mm movie of a recent protest against Richard Nixon at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

My children have always been reprimanded by the racist Anglo teachers for wearing UFW buttons and other cultural symbols, only this time it got way out of hand.

The principal just walked in the room and unplugged the movie machine and told the students to get out. When Patricia protested the principal's abrupt and abusive actions, he grabbed her by her arm and literally threw her out of the room. Patricia weighed only 90 pounds. All of the students were in complete shock and couldn't believe what they were witnessing. That afternoon a large group of students who had witnessed the incident met at our house with my wife and children to discuss what to do.

As always, my wife's complaint landed on the deaf ears of the school administrator and superintendent. It was decided by the students to walk out and picket the schools until they

met their 10 demands, which included the removal of the school principal. Finally the school board gave us a special meeting to be held on April 18, 1972 at the Ruth Brown School Auditorium.

The meeting was packed with an overflow audience and the sheriff had to disarm racist groups that came to take care of the Mexican students. It was one of the largest school board audiences in the history of the Palo Verde Valley, even larger than the Los Angeles school board meetings that dealt with the East Los Angeles School walkouts of 1968. Nothing resulted from the school board meeting, but it did solidify our struggle for autodetermination.

Thanks to my wife's commitment to support her children against the racist public schools, we were able to eventually build the only independent Chicano/Indio school.

After three weeks on the picket lines and the rejection by the school board, the students and parents decided to start their own school, which is how La Escuela de la Raza Unida was born. The school opened its doors for operations on May 1, 1972, the International World Workers Labor Day. And at the city park under the shade of every tree was a K-12 bilingual-bicultural classroom.

The new school had three components that were integrated in the overall teaching.

Number One: I got the full support of Cesar Chavez to participate and collaborate in utilizing the UFWOC office as the administration office for secretarial courses and as a service center.

Number Two: The Blythe city park served as the school with a classroom under the shade of every tree.

Number Three: The Blythe teen post was utilized as the library, recreation, boxing gym, and community hall. Our group was in charge of the local neighborhood teen post.

The students stuck to their ideals and commitment in spite of the threats by school officials, the Welfare department, border patrolmen, police, the district attorney, and the temperatures that hovered daily around 110 to 115 degrees Fahrenheit.

College students from the University of California and other colleges flocked to Blythe to assist in the organizing of the new school. Local high school teachers volunteered their services and taught the high school students. In turn the high school students taught the junior high students, who in turn taught the primary grades. Like a solid indivisible rock, the student movement continued in its struggle.

The union participation in the student movement gave us a large new pool of recruits for the UFW struggle. During that same year, the UFW began the Huelga School in Delano

because of hostility toward the Chavez and other UFW children in the Delano public schools.

When ERU celebrated its 10th anniversary, Cesar sent a letter of support stating that “no other group has come close to the success you have achieved, and the ones who truly benefit from all this are the farmworker children.”

After the union closed the office on Main Street in Blythe, we opened the office at our new Escuela de La Raza Unida building.

Cesar Chavez’s Fast in Phoenix, May 11 to June 4, 1972

During the first days of Escuela de la Raza Unida’s operation, Cesar made stops here in Blythe at the school to inform us of the law that was a threat to the union. I was able to organize a committee in Yuma, Arizona, to gather thousands of signatures against the proposed bill in the legislation.

On May 11, 1972, Jack Williams signed an unconstitutional law outlawing boycotts. That is when Cesar Chavez announced the beginning of his fast on the steps of the capitol in Phoenix before 1000 farmworkers. My son and I played the corridos during the rally.

In the past Cesar had wanted me to organize a MAPA chapter in Yuma, so that we could have an inroad into the local Mexican community, but it was to no avail, because all of Cesar’s cousins and other active Chicanos were afraid of the growers. This despite the fact that Cesar was born 10 miles from Yuma and had more than 750 relatives there.

I was able to get more support from the migrant farmworkers than from the Yuma locals.

The Chavez family was even afraid to go and complain to their local senator, Harold Gliss. Senator Gliss was one of the strong supporters of H.B. 2134. When we were unsuccessful in our efforts to overturn the law, Cesar decided to go on another fast to protest.

I had the big Greyhound bus and we would pack it with farmworkers and students to Phoenix for the rallies when Cesar was fasting. During that time we had a lot of support from unions and well-known people such as Coretta Scott King, the Kennedys, etc. When Cesar was about to end his fast, Dolores Huerta came to Blythe and saw that I had on a Nehru shirt. She took it with her to have Cesar wear it.

When Cesar ended the fast we made one of the biggest marches in the history of Arizona. Thousands marched from Santa Rita in southwest Phoenix up to Central Avenue to the Del Web Hotel where Cesar broke bread. The Kennedys were there with us and they also sang along with my sons and me. Joan Baez was the main performer. The support was great and the people were all energized.

The Murder of Mario Barreras, May 18, 1972

During the first days of ERU, a brutal killing took place on Carlton Avenue in El Barrio Cuchillo. Richard Krupp, a Blythe police officer who had twice been sued for police brutality by local Chicanos in federal court, shot and killed Mario Barrera, a young farmworker from El Barrio.

The Chicano population was so outraged that they held a vigil for three nights and four days inside and outside the Blythe City Hall and police station. Thanks to the tremendous support of the Chicanos, in the first march we had over 800 people. On the following day's march, more than 1000 people with candles showed up in downtown Blythe. People from all over came, including the farmworkers from Coachella and Imperial valleys.

After the four-day vigil, the Riverside County district attorney relieved the Blythe police department of their law enforcement duty. Officer Richard Krupp was arrested and taken to jail in Indio, California. I believe that it was the first time in the U. S. history that an Anglo cop had been arrested for killing a Chicano.

The trial was held in Indio. For more than three weeks, 50 to 100 persons would travel daily to the court. Over 13 eyewitnesses testified in superior court before the all-white jury, yet they found the officer not guilty. After the verdict, the Blythe chief of police called me at the union office and asked me what I thought of the idea of the city hiring Krupp again. I told him if they did hire him and anything happened, it would be his fault and on his conscience.

Krupp left town and joined the Aryan Brothers, a pro-Nazi group in the Spirit Lake area of Idaho. We were able to get the firm of David Erksstein to sue the city on behalf of the widow of Mario, and after four years, she finally won.

My Daughter Carmela's 14-day Fast in Conjunction with Cesar Chavez's Phoenix Fast May 11 to May 25, 1972

With all the excitement and activities of the striking students, Cesar Chavez's fast, boycotts, and strikes, my wife and I did not keep track of the eating habits of all our children. We had just started the new school in the park. Our house was like a battle zone, with students coming in and out, sleeping in the front yard, going to and from the union office, the city park, etc. The parents of the students of the new school would bring food for everybody in the movement, but my wife and I never knew whether our teenage children ate or not.

One day in the afternoon, our daughter Carmela just collapsed in our living room. My wife and I didn't know what was happening until my other children told us that she had been fasting and that she began her fast when Cesar Chavez began his fast in Phoenix.

We took her to the doctor in Blythe and he couldn't figure out what was wrong. Carmela had broken her fast with a hamburger the day she collapsed. From that day on she couldn't walk, so we took her to my mother's house, which was a few houses up the street from ours. There she could rest and be away from the center of activity. My mother had a lot of experience in nursing people back to health. But even my mother couldn't get her to walk.

Finally we took her to the Riverside County General Hospital 175 miles away. There we had a specialist check her out. He asked us to relate everything that happened before she collapsed. We explained how she had begun to fast during Cesar's fast, and about the three weeks of picketing the public schools in the extreme heat. We also told him that she had seen Mario Barrera's brains blown out and scattered over the front seat when he was killed point blank on the temple by Richard Krupp.

The doctor told us that she was in a complete state of shock, and that her spinal gland that fed the brain was damaged, and she was not getting the vitamins because she had abused her body during her fasting ordeal. He said that if she hadn't collapsed she could have died if she had continued her fast. Carmela at that time was only 15 years old. The doctor said that an older person like Cesar could withstand the ordeal, but not a child. Then the doctor began talking to her loudly and using psychology. Finally, as if she had never been bedridden, she got up and we helped her to take her first steps. All our prayers had indeed been answered because we thought that she might never walk again. We were very grateful to the doctor and to the Almighty.

Of all my nine children, Carmela is the one who has continued organizing, developing new ideas and programs that provide services to better the downtrodden. She still has to take medicine for her damaged spinal cord.

The Napa Valley Nine Winery Boycott Campaign of 1972

I was sent up north to Napa County again in the beginning of January to organize the so called Napa Nine Winery campaign that targeted Nestle-Beringer, Korbel, Kornel, Krug, Mondavi, Sebastiani, Martini, Weibel, and the Wente wineries.

When I got to St. Helena, I went straight to the Christian Brothers camp that already had a contract with the union. The camp was like a brand-new motel and it reflected the consciousness that this Catholic religious order had for the housing of their workers. I stayed there and was able to recruit from the union workers living there to help me with the organizing of the different wineries, and to take them to boycott at the Ralph's Market and Lucky Liquor stores in and around the Bay Area.

In Napa we also had a very strong MAPA chapter and a very militant Brown Beret chapter that helped in organizing in the vineyards and boycott. With the help of MAPA, I was able to have some of the workers of the nonprofit North Bay Human Resources Organization assist me in organizing and showing me the different vineyards and the workers' living

quarters. We found out that the majority of the winery labor camps were dilapidated railroad boxcars, old barns, and outrageous unlivable shanties in the middle of the gorgeous vineyards and mansions.

One of my assistants during the campaign was Candido Morales Rosas, a native of Oaxaca. He is the present-day advisor to Mexican president Vicente Fox and serves as the representative of Mexicans living in the United States. Our main enemy was Ren Harris, president of the farm bureau and spokesman for the Napa-Sonoma-Mendocino Wine Growers Council.

We were able to publicize pictures of their deplorable housing conditions compared to the UFW's Christian Brothers' motel model. We got a lot of press people interested, and began giving them tours of the wineries' housing sites, and debated the growers at local colleges and in San Francisco.

It was a tough campaign because most of the workers at this time of the year were the permanent workers and not the migrant workers who did the harvesting in the fall. I had to sneak into their houses at the vineyards at night because in the daytime the growers had guards with dogs patrolling the vineyards.

One of the most inhumane conditions that I encountered was at the Korbel winery, where the grower would lock up the workers in a large old barn. When I visited the workers in the day they told me to come at night so I could talk to them and see for myself how they were treated. I went that night. To my surprise, the doors of the barn where the workers lived and slept had a chain and padlock. I called to them through some cracks on the old wooden walls and gave them our union leaflets and told them I was going to get the press to come and see the manner that the grower kept his workers. They were in a state of complete slavery.

After all the press, we were able to expose the dilapidated labor camp at Beringer, which was condemned and closed down by the county. In the following few years, all of the camps of the wineries that we had publicized were closed down.

MAPA members like attorney Louis Flores, George Ortiz, and others kept the political pressure on the county officials. The most hostile of the Napa Nine was the Mondavi winery, and we had the most militant UFW supporters at the camp called "El Campo Colorado." A lot of our committee members were fired and some of our organizers were beaten up by the Mondavi goons.

After two months in the Napa Nine campaign, I had to go back to Blythe and prepare for the lettuce strike and boycott. We didn't win the Napa Nine campaign, but we did better the workers' living quarters, working conditions, and pay, and brought about the awareness of the living conditions to the county inspector and state officials.

Anti-Proposition 22 Campaign in 1972

In the late summer of 1972, the union began a voter registration drive throughout the state. In Blythe we had been involved in voter registration since our successful drive of 1958, when we ousted the judge, mayor, and chief of police. We would also take the people to Los Angeles to help defeat Proposition 22.

The union had set up a tent city in Lincoln Park so that the union people and its volunteers could stay in the city.

The union came out with a new strategy of how to reach out to more voters: the Human Billboard Sign Campaign Against Prop. 22. The signs would say "Farmworkers say No on 22." We had hundreds of people holding sign up high so that the traffic could see them at the major street intersections in the heavily Democratic districts of Los Angeles.

Since I always had my guitar with me on the street singing the farmworker songs, I felt like Peter Piper because I always had a crowd around me. We were handing out the leaflets. One of the highlights of the campaign was when Ethel Kennedy and Coretta Scott King came and offered their support to the union. By October of 1972, ERU had organized one of the best ballet folkloricos in Southern California. During the big rally, I played some songs and my wife and I felt so proud when our children danced in the presence of Ethel Kennedy and Coretta Scott King. In the end of the campaign we were victorious despite all of the wind and rain that we suffered through staying in the makeshift tent city camp in Lincoln Park.

Safeway Boycott of 1973

We had just finished with the proposition 22 campaign when the union began a national campaign to boycott Safeway stores. Our campaign here in Blythe against the Safeway store was very effective and the flow of customers went down to a trickle.

We were militant and maintained a constant picket line in front of the store. At that time we had a strong MAPA chapter in Blythe, which included parents of ERU students and workers who were under union contract with Freshpict Farms. Sixty percent of the Palo Verde Valley was Mexican-American so we were able to stop them from shopping at Safeway.

One weekend, a violent battle almost erupted on the picket line when two carloads of members of the America Nazi Party came from Orange County. They had been invited to come and participate with the anti-union forces led by the local growers' association. At that time, Palo Verde Valley had the largest per-capita membership of the racist John Birch Society chapter in California and they were very vocal in the local radio and press.

The Nazis got out of their cars and began harassing our picketers. They would throw lettuce in our faces to agitate our members into fighting. When I saw them coming, I had one of our members call the Blythe police. The chief arrived immediately with other officers and he pleaded with me not to start anything.

I relayed to him that I didn't know how long I could keep our group from not defending themselves from the Nazis. Though just a small group, they blatantly continued to throw lettuce at us, even in the presence of the police.

But what the Anglo Nazis didn't know was that just eight months earlier, the Chicano community in Blythe had taken over the city jail and incarcerated one police officer. I demanded that the Nazis be removed from the premises immediately or the chief was going to suffer the consequences. Within five minutes, the Nazis were told to leave or go to jail.

Thanks to my mother's Catholic teaching and my commitment to Cesar's teachings of nonviolence, no violence erupted. If my brothers had been there during that time, they would have taken care of the Nazis in their own way.

Later in the 1980s we began the new boycott against Vons (Safeway merged with Vons). We were the only city in California that was able to completely close down a Vons supermarket, which is now a Ford garage.

D'Arrigo Lettuce Strike and Campaign, January 1973

The union continued the lettuce strike in the Imperial Valley and we traveled there to help the strike. There were many arrests and jailings. Marshall Ganz led the strike campaign. We held a big rally outside the El Centro jail when the jailed strikers were finally released.

Afterwards, the union decided to boycott D'Arrigo Farms' lettuce because we were not having success in the strike. We had a big rally in the Calexico grade school and from there the boycott traveled to different cities. Our Native youth committee from Parker, Arizona, presented Cesar Chavez with a beautiful beadwork necklace of the Hopi peace thunderbird, the eagle. Cesar always wore it and was very proud of it. They explained to him that when the eagle's head faced east, it represented peace, and if it faced west, it meant conflict. Cesar stood for peace.

The Teamsters were at it again, signing contracts with the growers. We were going on a campaign again to stop them. Some MAPA members were related to the Teamster union's top brass. I was able to arrange a meeting with the Chicano Teamsters. We met on the outskirts of El Paso, Texas, with Cesar. They explained the Teamster plan to sign contracts with all growers because they just wanted the dues and not enforcement of the contracts. When we were in El Paso, we met with the strikers of the Farrah Company and introduced them to our boycotters.

We discussed the whole Chicano Teamster involvement, and Cesar told me to try and organize the Chicano Teamster rank-and-file members against the Teamsters' anti-UFW campaign. During the Teamster D'Arrigo campaign I would sing the "*Corrido of La Mula Teamster*" and "*El Corrido del Boycott*."

Coachella Valley Strike and Teamster Confrontation of 1973

During the months before the beginning of the Coachella Valley grape strike in 1973, I was able to penetrate the Chicano Teamster rank and file. MAPA leaders Bert Corona and Abe Tapia helped me in organizing a Chicano Teamster rank-and-file committee against the Teamsters union in agriculture organizing. The committee was very powerful in the Los Angeles area where the Teamster goons came from.

It was led by Mauricio Terrazas and Archie Murrieta of Local 338, which included most of the Chicanos of the Yellow Freight Trucking Company. Archie Murrieta was a descendant of Joaquin Murrieta. It was very obvious that the Teamster contracts were a shame and a disgrace to organized labor, yet some Chicano Teamsters led by Manuel O'campo came to beat up the Mexican strikers of the UFW.

The grape strike in the Coachella Valley of 1973 was the most violent that I had experienced since the Imperial Valley AWOC strikes of 1960.

Ray Huerta, then the director of the Coachella UFW office, was superb in maintaining calm among the strikers. I remember when Father John Banks from back East had his nose smashed in by the fist of a 340-pound Teamster named Flaco while he was eating at the Trocadero Cafe.

The UFW had closed our union office on Main Street. At the end of 1973, we were operating out of our ERU service center.

As the grape harvest moved north to the San Joaquin Valley, it was the sheriff of Kern County who continued the attacks on the striking men, women, and children. I would go to participate in the big demonstrations and in the funeral of Juan de La Cruz. Overall, we had a bad year because our local Freshpict contract was not renewed or the contracts in Coachella.

Blythe Bus Massacre, January 15, 1974

One of the most tragic accidents to ever happen in the history of migrant farmworkers traveling to their job site happened in the Palo Verde Valley. On that day three busloads of daily commuters from Mexicali, Baja California, were on their way to work in the fields of High and Mighty Farm in the area of Blythe.

In the early hours of the morning, one of the buses failed to make the turn on the corner of 20th Avenue coming down Ranel Avenue. When the driver realized he was about to come to the corner, he tried to cut it sharp but it was too late and they went straight down a 20-foot embankment into a drain ditch.

The drain ditch had about 8 inches of water. The seats were not secured or fastened to the floor of the bus. Upon hitting the bottom of the ditch, all of the rear seats crashed down on the front of the bus in a sort of accordion effect. Twenty people died and the rest were injured.

I was at the Coachella UFW Office when I received the call from my son in Blythe telling me of the accident. He had already gone to the site and taken pictures. I came back immediately and was still able to talk to some of the survivors. I called Calexico and we started to investigate the accident.

Most of the people lived in Mexicali. The office in Calexico did a wonderful job locating the deceased workers' families. There were two families that lived part-time here in Blythe and Mexicali. We had one of the biggest funeral processions ever in Mexicali.

It turned out that High and Mighty Farms had a Teamster contract that allowed them to hire farm labor contractors. The contractor's name was Jesus Ayala and he had a long list of labor violations and was one of the biggest strikebreakers in the area. The UFW struck for two years against High and Mighty Farms during the melon season.

We wanted to make sure that they paid for the damage done by the labor contractor. The Calexico and Blythe offices were able to get the survivors and their dependants their Social Security benefits even while they lived in Mexicali, and we sued the contractor, High and Mighty Farms, Riverside County Transportation Department, and the Palo Verde Irrigation District. We won \$1.5 million for all of the descendents of the deceased.

Besides the lawsuit, we pressured the federal transportation department to enact new regulations on the transporting of human cargo. Cal-OSHA also came down and implemented new laws concerning the duties of the bus driver and foreman during the day.

Before, the bus driver was the crew foreman. He would began his day at 2 a.m., waiting to pick up the workers to be recruited in Calexico, then travel two to three hours to the job site in Blythe or Parker, work eight hours, drive back to Calexico, then go to his house around 8 or 9 p.m. It was horrible that 20 people had to die before the authorities would take interest in the daily commuting conditions of the poor migrant farmworkers.

One of the major victories that we were able to receive from the tragedy was the construction of 100 homes that formed the Ripley State Migrant Camp. We were able to lobby Senator Craven and the CRLA to introduce legislation to provide monies to construct a state migrant camp in Southern California. The Coachella and Palo Verde

valleys competed for the funding to construct a migrant camp. Thanks to the publicity that the Blythe Massacre generated, Palo Verde Valley won.

The UFW Anti-Immigrant Campaign and Falling Out with Bert Corona, MAPA, and Other Chicano Groups

The UFW had been plagued with strikebreakers coming from Mexico for a long time. We spent a lot of time meeting with Mexican union officials of CTM in Mexicali, and reaching out to the general commuting farmworker population. There is a tremendous constant arrival of new immigrants at the border cities who want jobs first, owing to large turnover in the workforce.

After the first three years of the UFWOC strike in Coachella and Delano, we realized that educating-the-new-immigrant approach was not working out.

In 1971 a racist state senator from Northern California was able to pass through legislation—the infamous Dixon-Arnett bill. The bill focused on employer sanctions to stop the hiring of undocumented workers. Workers would be subject to fines, and the employers were authorized to make the determination of employees having green cards or not. The authority of the federal INS was given to the employers, which was totally absurd. The Mexicans were labeled as parasites and a burden to the Anglo way of life, sort of the same mentality that a lot of the Anglo population still has today against the Mexicans.

What made the whole Dixon-Arnett campaign so infamous within the Chicano community was that the UFWOC and CRLA were supporting it and lobbied the legislature for its passage. This was the beginning of a major split between Bert Corona, MAPA, CASA (Centro Acion Social Autonomo), and many other Chicano movement groups whose goals are still “no borders, one indigenous continent.” MAPA’s job was to educate the immigrants, not make them the scapegoats for the racist capitalistic population.

The UFW walked right into the hands of anti-Mexican attitudes of the old AFL-CIO anti-immigrant practices and forgot the basic human rights principle that an “injury to one is an injury to all.”

This was one instance when Cesar used to say that politics makes strange bedfellows. Bert Corona, CASA, and the rest of the pro-immigrant groups countered with massive demonstrations. Afterwards the state supreme court declared the law unconstitutional because the enforcement of immigration laws were the jurisdiction of the federal government and not the state, nor the self-interested unions.

After 1971, the UFW wanted all the offices to report any undocumented workers in the farms and to report them to the INS, and they wanted monthly tabulations of the numbers reported. It was during this period that I ran into differences with the policies and direction that the UFW was taking.

I never reported a single undocumented immigrant. In fact, I was on the CASA board of directors with Bert Corona. We would take our Blythe UFW members to Los Angeles to demonstrate against the Dixon-Arnett law. Our union office gave immigration services, with my brother Mike as the expert in citizenship and immigration. When we needed immigration attorneys, we would send the people to Bert Corona in Los Angeles or the attorneys would come to Blythe to counsel large groups.

The Figueroas had just finished suing the INS and customs officers from Calexico in the San Diego federal district court. The INS was and is the most hated federal department of the United States, and we would never become their stoolies. During those years the majority of the officers were Anglo racists from Texas and Virginia.

My family and culture came first. We have always had strong principles and we never forgot our indigenous traditions. During general meetings in La Paz, I would sort of stick out like a sore thumb because I wouldn't participate in the INS campaign and because of my close association with Bert Corona, MAPA, and the indigenous Chicano movement.

I had my biggest run-ins with Marshall Ganz and Dolores Huerta. They would say, "Well, Alfredo can take care of the Chicano movement," implying that the whole Chicano movement that we had been fostering for years was just a fad or toy to be manipulated. Cesar never once reprimanded me for my Chicano movement participation. On the contrary, he knew that I had many contacts all over the place.

After the Dixon-Arnett bill died, anti-immigrant groups were able to lobby Congressman Peter Rodino to introduce similar legislation at the federal level. I continued working against the Rodino bill with CASA, and Bert was able to organize the National Coalition for Fair Immigration Laws and Practices. Even Ted Kennedy was in favor of the Rodino bill until Bert Corona and the CASA members got to him in Washington and he changed his vote.

The Yuma County Citrus Strikes, Fall 1974

The UFW immigrant bashing continued and the frustration of the strikebreaker situation came to a climax when Manuel Chavez was sent to Yuma to start the citrus strike in September of 1974. The strike was started after the union had protested for many years the lackadaisical attitudes of INS enforcement on the border. The union continued to fail in persuading immigrants to respect their strike.

During the strike there was a lot of violence going on and a lot of bad publicity against the union. Finally the UFW arranged a collaborative agreement with the INS to have a roving patrol by UFW members and INS. Both groups were going up and down along the 100-mile stretch of the border to prevent the Mexicans from crossing over.

I never participated in this campaign. I went once or twice and saw the UFW members acting as INS officers. There were even army tents along the route for them to sleep and eat in. It looked like the North–South Vietnam Demarcation Zone.

All my friends in San Luis were mad as hell at the union and also at me. I had to do a lot of talking to get them off my back.

The Yuma strike was a complete disgrace and failure and only produced anti-UFW sentiments. It also brought about a complete split between Bert Corona and Cesar Chavez. A few months before Cesar died in 1993, he called Bert Corona and got together with him. Cesar finally confessed the mistakes that the union had made and they were able to reconcile a lot of their differences.

Even today, 29 years after the Yuma citrus strike, there is still animosity and resentment that prevails among the Mexicans in the Yuma–San Luis area against the UFW.

On August 22, 2003, Richard Chavez and I were invited by the Gasden Unified School District to participate in the inauguration of a brand-new Cesar Chavez Elementary School in San Luis, Arizona. Despite the fact that Cesar died in San Luis, and was born 35 miles away on the junction of the Colorado and Gila rivers, there were only six farmworkers present from San Luis and only one other Chavez from Yuma: Cesar’s cousin Ray Chavez, who worked for a short time as a bus driver for the union.

1975 Agriculture Labor Relations Board Act

The year 1975 was a very exciting one and it gave the UFW the boost that it needed to suppress the qualms that prevailed among the critics of the union, which said that the UFW was dead. The Agriculture Labor Relations Board Act was finally passed and signed by Governor Jerry Brown, a good friend of the union.

It gave farmworkers the right to have elections in the fields to choose whether or not they wanted a union. I was excited because I knew we could win the elections in the Palo Verde Valley. It had been some time since our budget was terminated, yet people still continued coming to the ERU. Regardless of the closure we felt it was our duty to service their needs like we had done for years. I knew that sooner or later the union would be strong again.

One day in early August a group of farmworkers led by my son-in-law’s father came to ERU and asked me what was happening with the UFW because they had just received a visit from a group of Teamster organizers. The Mapes produce workers were given Teamster propoganda and were told that the Mapes Company wanted the workers to vote for the Teamsters.

I didn’t know what on earth was going on. The following day I tried to contact the ALRB office in El Centro, California, but they were not in operation yet. I went out to meet with

the workers since they were all locals that I knew personally. I explained to them that the law was not in effect yet and advised them not to sign or commit to anything until I could get the word from La Paz.

The following day another group of workers from Nish Noroian Farms came and told me that the Teamsters had been there also. I told them that the growers had invited them to persuade the workers to vote for the Teamsters.

I finally contacted Cesar and told him what was happening with the Mapes and Noroian farms and of the heavy Teamster presence here in the Palo Verde Valley. I hadn't been paid for a long time and we would need a budget for our service center to fund the election campaign. It was going to take more than one organizer to organize all the companies as they reached their maximum employment when they began the harvest in the fall.

Cesar said to go ahead and continue organizing full time and that they were going to send somebody to Blythe to work out a proposed budget. As it turned out the election date had already been set by the ALRB and I still didn't get any help from La Paz. The valley was swarming with Teamster activities. Those were hectic days for me. Finally, La Paz sent two veteran organizers to help in the campaign: Jose Luna and Lupe Murguia.

They came a few days before the elections and worked frantically to contact all the workers and explain the new ALRB Law. It was the first time in the history of agriculture that the workers had ever been given the right to vote in the fields. Also, the permanent locals were what we call *apatronados* or subservient to the foremen.

It was a hard campaign and on the day of the elections we had our committees organized to oversee the election proceedings. Two of the first elections under the new law were at Mapes Produce and Nish Noroian Farms. We won both elections by a wide margin and the growers and Teamster organizers were greatly disappointed. They thought that it was going to be an easy win. They thought that they were going to get the workers to vote for them because the growers had invited them and I was always being run out of the fields.

We continued having elections during the lettuce, lemon, and cantaloupe harvests until 1976. When I wasn't working on the elections in the Palo Verde Valley, I would help out in the Imperial Valley since a lot of the lettuce harvest companies did the harvesting in both places.

Despite many obstacles and reprisals, the UFW farmworkers in La Cuna de Aztlan (Palo Verde Valley) were the only ones in the state to win all the 12 elections held here. Thanks to our organizing since the early 1960s, we won not only the elections in the fields, but also victories in labor enforcement, health clinics, building of a labor camp, etc.

Thanks to the overall efforts of the parents, students, and the leadership of the only Chicano Indigenous alternative school in the U.S., the farmworkers in the Palo Verde Valley have made tremendous progress.

Final Words as to My Participation in the UFW Struggle from 1965 to 1975

This brief history of my participation in the UFW struggle is only the tip of the iceberg of all the suffering that affected not only me and my family during the turbulent years of the 1960s and 1970s, but also hundreds of other organizers and their families. Many of us gave up everything to support one of the most important labor struggles of the century. Cesar Chavez was the president and leader, but it was the work of ordinary people that drove the UFW struggle to upgrade the conditions of farmworkers.

Truthfully, we never knew what was going to happen or whether we were going to come back home alive or not.

When we left to participate in the massive demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the INS, police killings, and racist laws, or to walk the long marches and stand in picket lines, we never knew when or if the so-called super-patriot defenders of the white establishment and capitalist society were going to unleash their venom.

I always tried to fulfill any obligation or commitment to which I had agreed. Cesar always praised me because he knew that he could depend on my family and me. Despite the fact that the UFW, Cesar, and Dolores didn't appreciate some of my close activities with the Chicano movement and Bert Corona, I was always called upon. Sometimes I went against the grain of the mainstream UFW thought and policy.

The union lost a lot of their community input when it had to follow the national AFL-CIO agenda that was sometimes at odds with the Chicano community.

I remember one incident during one of the early UFW conventions. Gilbert Padilla, a board member of the union, came up to me and told me that Cesar wanted me to stop campaigning against the proposed Sun Desert Nuclear Power Plant of the San Diego Gas and Electric Company. The plant was to be built 15 miles southwest of Blythe, and the laborers' union was supporting its construction.

SDGE had already bought 13,000 acres from John Norton Farms and had laid off 200 farmworkers because they were going to fallow the fields, and the water rights were allotted to cool the nuclear power plant. The plant was to be built at the base of our sacred mountain: Hamock-Avi in our Mojave native language, Calli in Nahuatl.

I told Gilbert that I was sorry, but my principles, dignity, and traditions came before any self-interested group or union. Cesar had always taught us that we were supposed to be a democratic union and that our rights would be respected. I introduced an Anti-Sun Desert

Nuclear Power Plant Resolution to the general membership to oppose its construction. The resolution passed unanimously. I was able to use the UFW resolution to organize our Native reservation and other environmental groups to also go against the plant.

Our organization in Blythe was the first group to stop the construction of a nuclear power plant in U.S. history. Thanks to Governor Jerry Brown and his state Atomic Energy Commission, the final blow came in 1979 when the plant's licensing was denied. I also opposed the union's policy of anti-immigrant campaigning on the Mexican border.

Overall, I'm not sorry about my participation in the UFW struggle (despite the fact that I get a very small Social Security pension) because my family was already involved for a long time in assisting the farmworkers in the Palo Verde Valley. My family continues even today in that same struggle. We were just ready to join a larger group that was involved in the same struggle.

Through Cesar Chavez's example, I upheld the principle of my early Catholic upbringing, which in my mother's words, taught that "to sacrifice for others is peace."

I was always anti-war, anti-gun, anti-hunting, and I refused to go into military service. When Cesar's son, Fernando Chavez, came out against the draft, I was delighted.

Besides my mother's Catholic teaching of love for our fellow man and family unity, it was my father who ingrained in us the fact that your boss is your biggest enemy. His rich Yaqui culture tradition also taught us to fight against all costs.

My whole childhood here in Blythe—and the knowledge that I was a descendant of Joaquin Murrieta—made me a candidate to join the farmworker struggle.

(Edited by Michelle Leivas Kristmann)