

Humberto M. Gomez 1965–1989

My name is Humberto M. Gomez and I was born in Trejo, Silao, Guanajuato Mexico. My father, Jose Ali Gomez, and my two brothers, Jose M. Gomez and Antonio M. Gomez, came to the United States as farmworkers under the bracero program. In the mid-1950s my father and brothers became permanent legal residents of the United States. They worked in several states as farmworkers, but they chose California to live and work after becoming legal residents.

At the age of 15, on May 10, 1965, I joined my father and brothers in California and started to work full time as a farmworker, even though I was a minor and should have been in school and not working full time. I used to think that I was fooling the growers when they did allow me to work full time as a farmworker. Now I know that I was fooling myself by not pursuing my education.

During the fall of 1965, I became involved with the farmworkers' support committee from the central San Joaquin Valley under the direction of Brother Crecencio Mendoza. I began to attend meetings for the organizing and support committees with Jose Beas, Juan Bejarano, Juan Contreras, Sr. Cortez, Pedro De La Fuente, and my cousin, Miguel Mendoza. We used to meet in Fresno, or in the house of Pedro De La Fuente in Selma and attended meetings in Delano either in people's houses or at Filipino Hall.

After the signing of the first contracts with Schenley, Gallo, and Christian Brothers, we would meet at Pedro De La Fuente's house or at the small union office in Parlier with Jessie and Arnold De La Cruz.

I was blessed and lucky to be around good leaders from the beginning of my involvement with the farmworkers. Besides the above, Grabiell "El Gordo" Martinez, Jessie De La Cruz, Jose Perez, Jesus "Don Chuya" Sanchez, Jose ("Chico") and Jose ("Grande") from Fresno. I don't remember their last names. Later on, I worked with Robert and Lala Escutia, Donato Gonzalez and wife, Niceforo, and Efigenia Rojas and all their families. Dona Elisa Hernandez was the best cook—in charge of feeding all the farmworkers in all our campaigns. There were also several other good and loyal union leaders and supporters who I hope some day will be recognized.

I remember union supporters like the Ybarra family from Sanger: Tanis, Sr., and his wife, Ofelia; Tanis Jr., Lea Ybarra, and Melba Ybarra. Maria Zapata, along with Lea Ybarra, created the student support committee from Fresno State. Later on other student activists such as Liz Hernandez, Gloria Hernandez, Emma Hernandez, Grace Soliz, and Becky Mendibles made their mark in the union movement. God bless Sal Gonzalez, Hector Aveitia, and Cruz Bustamente Sr., (father of California's present lieutenant governor) for making sure that we had food and clothes when needed.

As a farmworker, I did suffer and I witnessed injustices from the growers, especially big corporations. Therefore, even though I was very afraid to get involved with the union movement, it was easy for me to understand that in order to make a difference and make changes to protect my rights and the rights of my fellow farmworkers (including those of my family), I knew I must leave my fear behind and get 100 percent involved in the union. I got lots of help to get rid of my fear by working with Hope Lopez, Pablo Espinoza, y mi compadre, Gilbert Padilla. Gilbert was the person who pushed me harder to become more involved with the farmworker union and the labor movement in general.

With the farmworker union, I participated in all the strikes in the Central Valley—from Coit Ranch melons, tomatoes, and cotton to Roberts' Farm grapes and stone fruit—and all the big strikes including ones in the Fresno, San Joaquin, and Salinas valleys.

I was arrested many times, maybe 100 times or more. My first arrest was during the White River strike in Tulare County on the famous county line road separating Kern and Tulare counties. I got so mad with the growers for arresting me for nothing that I postponed my wedding to spend more time in the political campaigns against propositions and bad laws affecting the farmworkers. During the first constitutional convention in Fresno, I was elected as one of the first union auditors, along with Jessie De La Cruz and Carlos Valencia.

I will always remember the first convention because it took us almost 24 hours to settle the dues structure—and also for brother Henry Chacon to question Cesar as to why we were allowing that man (“Who is this man Robert?”) to tell us how to run our union meetings when Cesar was referring to the Robert's Rules of Order.

From a plain farmworker, I became a union representative. I was not always popular because I was very young. In fact, the workers at Christian Brothers in Reedley asked me to get the hell out when I was sent by Gilbert Padilla to stop a wild walk-out that they called due to unsafe conditions. The grass in the field was two inches tall. Some of those workers were Roberto De La Cruz, Jessie De La Cruz, and Gabriel Martinez, the ranch committee president. Now Bobby De La Cruz and I laugh about the incident.

I did all kinds of work and jobs with the farmworker union: contract administration, negotiations, arbitration, organizing, political action, community, labor, and church activities. I was a national representative when I left the United Farm Workers in late 1988.

I am very grateful, proud, and honored to have worked side by side with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Frank Ortiz, Marshall Ganz, Pete Velasco, Philip Vera Cruz, Jessica Govea, mi compadre Gilbert Padilla, Eliseo Medina, Andy Imutan, Ben Madock, Tony Oreindain, LeRoy Chatfield, Jerry Cohen, Richard Chavez, Pablo Espinosa, Esther Uranday, Hope Lopez, mi comadre Esther Padilla, David Martinez, mi compadre Artie Mendoza and wife, Connie, Art Rodriguez, Paul Chavez, and all the Chavez and Huerta families. Larry Itliong, Mack and Diana Lyons, and several other UFW leaders whose

names skip my mind. I respected and admired all of them, even when we did have our differences of opinion. However, we always worked as a team after discussing and making a plan of action.

I will always remember the trust and big push that Cesar give me when I was called to be a union negotiator along with Miguel Contreras, now the executive officer and president of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor AFL-CIO, and Grace Soliz, who now works with the district attorney from Fresno County. I remember that after all the negotiators and attorney Jerry Cohen had put together the master labor agreement, we were divided by areas to negotiate the contracts. I told Cesar that I needed training and that my English was not good; his response was that if we could put together the master labor agreement, we were ready to start negotiating. Regarding my English, he told me it was up to me to work on that and I took the challenge.

The father of organizing, Fred Ross, Sr., used to call me the “man behind the curtains” because I didn’t like to take credit, preferring instead to credit the farmworkers, Cesar, and the executive board. I did my job and moved on to the next one.

I was also known as *Mi Ranchito* (“little ranch”) because I did refuse to participate in or play the Game. Roberto Garcia and Juan Manuel Rodriguez gave me this nickname because when I explained to Cesar the reasons I would never play such a game, I told him that in *mi ranchito* in Guanajuato, where I was born, I would kill anybody who would call me an S.O.B. Even now, all the old-timers call me *Mi Ranchito*, and yes, I have changed. Now I wouldn’t kill somebody who reminds me of my poor mother. I called that shop language.

I feel bad because I did not give a chance to sister Juliana or Larry Tramutola to play the Game with me. Juliana always blamed me for her transfers from one field office to another, and Larry Tramutola got very upset with me because I refused to allow the farmworkers to use several U-Haul trucks rented by Larry for transportation during Proposition 22 or other propositions that I don’t remember now. I told him that only the drivers will use the U-Haul trucks with the campaign signs, and we rented vans to transport the farmworkers from one place to another.

My reflection is that because of the union, I am who I am. I met and married my wife while in the union. All my family: father, brothers, and nephews were or are union members, as is my mother-in-law Josefina Florez (“*La Aguila Mayor*”), who is still working with the United Farm Workers in Delano. My beautiful wife, Maria, is the best wife and mother, and a hell of a good supporter and assistant. She is a member of the Laborers Union and for more than 10 years was the elected business manager and secretary-treasurer and founder of Laborers Union Local 550 at no charge. She was a 100 percent volunteer to the Union Local 550, which represented janitors, packers, and recycling workers. She gave me three wonderful kids: my son Humberto Z. Gomez, who is now a medical school student at Wake Forest University in North Carolina; my older daughter, Magdalena, who graduated from Carleton College in Minnesota and is now working with Salomon Smith Barney in the

Bay Area; and my baby, Maria De Jesus, who is a student at Fresno State University. My kids are also proud union members of Laborers Local 550.

Working with the union gave me the opportunity to know and work with wonderful and beautiful people of all colors, religions, and nationalities, men and women. I learned to agree and disagree, and that I must not to forget where I am coming from. I also learned to be thankful and value people even if I don't see them often or communicate with them. On this subject, I will never forget Father Ken Irrgang and Chris Hartmire and his wife. Because of their prayers and support (and good medical care at Valley Children's Hospital) my then tiny eight-month-old daughter, Maria De Jesus, overcame her problem of being born with a short esophagus. Now she is 21 and doing well.

To end my history, I have still been involved with the community and the labor movement since I left the United Farm Workers. I have been working with the Laborers International Union of North America, AFL-CIO, and my present position is the director of organizing for the Southern California District Council of Laborers. Therefore, in total, I have 38 years in the labor movement, 23 with United Farm Workers and 15 with the Laborers.