

David Brooks 1967

What led me to La Causa probably had less to do with the ideologies involved than a real liking for the Mexicanos and, more generally, campesinos. That fondness has never disappeared. I came to Delano at the very beginning of 1967. At that time I was a searching young physician, married with three young children, in medical residency in Fresno. I took a long hiatus from all and went to Mexico, loved what I encountered among the people, and returned to the mountains near Yosemite to sort it all out. I had followed the events of the grape strike over the past two years and then saw an ad—I think it was in the *New Republic*—that a physician was sought to serve the huelgistas. Responding, I met with Cesar and a few others on a foggy January morning at the favorite Delano coffee shop and agreed to stick around for a while and try things out. I saw the clinic, named in memory of Roger Terronez, met with Peggy, Marian, and LeRoy, and then went to work.

Our first patient was one of the clinic watchdogs who had cut his paw. It was fun—he held still, was sewn up, and recovered. The human patients were fun too—all easy to talk with and grateful for the help and courtesy given them. Many of the patients truly extended themselves. I remember Ramona Castro with deep love—may God rest her soul—and her family, who treated me like a son. I stayed in a little house with Luis Valdez and Donna Haber and a few others, all of us finding a little space for ourselves. The number of patients seen grew, and there was time to learn about the other activities with meals at Filipino Hall, meetings, visits to *El Malcriado*, El Teatro de Campesino, and LeRoy at the Service Center. Soon there were visits with local physicians and growers, all trying to convince me I had better things to do with my life.

After several weeks, the reality of supporting a family and resuming my training forced me to alter my schedule so I would see patients on most weekday evenings and most weekends. That 70-mile stretch of Highway 99 became a nightmare, and I was barely able to stay awake on the return. Ramona's family would always stay awake to chat with me at their house after the last patient was seen. It was here that I really learned to speak my still-broken Spanish, and to appreciate *buevos con nopales*. Sadly, Ramona took sick with a widespread cancer that, through no fault of hers, should have been discovered and treated a long time before. We took her to my hospital in Fresno where she had surgery and chemotherapy, but the cancer was unrelenting. In late spring of 1967 she died, a woman in her early 20s who never lost her smile or joy, not even with her dying breath.

The number of patients served continued to grow and many needed hospitalization. Some would come back with me to Fresno, but it was the early days of Medi-Cal and hard to jump counties. Dr. Clark remained helpful in Delano. But most would end up at Kern General. Peggy McGivern would often bring me along as an observer to assess the adequacy of treatment. I remember one such trip to Bakersfield with Marion Moses where we had to hitch hike back to Delano at midnight. Brrrr.

As time went on, Cesar let me express my opinions on whom we should treat and where the permanent clinic should be. I fell in love with a site in Earlimart with two large tile-roof buildings. One Sunday I joined Cesar for breakfast at Richard Chavez's house. I kept talking and talking about this place, while Cesar shoved a bowl of menudo in front of me. It was so picante (hot) that I almost spit that first mouthful across the table. Everyone had a good laugh and I shut up.

I began attending migrant farmworker seminars, foundation grant programs, and fundraising events. At one such event in Tiburon, Wendy Goepel introduced me to Bobby Kennedy. Later that evening, Bobby commented that everyone who meets Wendy falls in love with her, an exact statement made by a colleague one month earlier. As it worked out, I was no exception.

Eventually I felt Cesar just wasn't getting the picture. A few of us planned a coup of sorts, not violent of course, but expressing how we felt the direction should be. It never came off. What we were espousing was a nostalgic preservation of the campesino way of life at the expense of real justice. Cesar met with us individually and asked us to leave Delano. He did so in a most kind and caring way that you did not feel shattered but encouraged to go on with the work elsewhere. And so, on a bright June afternoon listening to the new Beatles' album "Sergeant Pepper" with the El Teatro group, I hit the road. The residency program was over, my marriage nearly over, and I asked God, "Now what?"

At this point, I guess I could end my note and I give you editorial privilege to do so. But there really is more and it evolved from the Delano experience. As the summer of 1967 began, Wendy and I became very close. With a common vision we spoke of a clinic that would fully serve the rural poor. We met with a few supporters, focused on a site in Woodville, 20-some miles north of Delano. I found work at a nearby hospital and Wendy completed her work in Washington. By summer's end we pooled our resources, got help from the self-help housing program, and by October of 1967, we began seeing patients.

Our patient load grew rapidly and so did our services. Legal and dental services were soon available. Professionals and students began to come and lend a hand. In compliance with Delano, which then had Jim Knight as physician, we had patients referred and cared for. The CRLA would not only defend us in our own problems, but would bring farm labor issues to our attention, such as the infamous short-handle hoe and pesticide problems. The visiting students would devote months to such projects, often with remarkable results.

There were visits to Sacramento on nutrition; and visits from Sacramento officials trying to refute some of our findings. What started modestly with four of us --Wendy; our nurse, Margo; our friend, Orlando; and myself -- had grown to a service in three locations with three physicians, five public health nurses, a staff of 20 and many volunteers. We all worked for "peanuts," kept open 24/7, never counted the hours or the chores before us. We made house calls, delivered babies at home or in the clinic and usually had the father play "*partero*." We worked also at two hospitals, one in Porterville and one in Tulare.

For fun we would farm, go fishing, kick back at Wendy's in beautiful Three Rivers, play music and sing. We even sponsored concerts, classical and rock, right in Woodville. We kept our ties to Delano. Helen Chavez would often visit with some of the kids. Even Cesar came once and received remarkable relief from that horrible back of his by the magical hands of Orlando's abuelo, a true *solvedor* and saint. We kept an annual date with Luis and El Teatro for a New Year's snowball fight up in the Sequoias. We called ourselves SALUD and we lasted 10 years. We legitimized ourselves as a nonprofit tax-exempt corporation. We grew and shared. We became well known in certain circles throughout the nation and we were all so proud to be a part of it. A product of the 1960s that could probably never again happen as it did.

Writing the above comes with a warm heart and joyous smile but also great sorrow and tears. My part in SALUD lasted only three years, four if one counts the salvaging. My hippie lifestyle eventually took its toll. I was busted for drug possession—marijuana carried a stiff penalty at that time—served time in jail, and lost my medical license. Wendy stuck by through all this and in the spring of 1971, with our two kids and one on the way, we took off for Mexico, my haven for sorting things out. On the way we stopped at La Paz. Wendy visited with Helen. I spent an hour and a half with Cesar on his kitchen floor showing him how to do yoga. I never heard about his back problem again.

Those 20 years that followed were marked with much pain and emptiness, yet punctuated with certain highs and maturation. Most of that time was spent in spiritual search in preference to social or professional achievement. Although I regained all my credentials, my past trailed as an albatross and I found what work I could, most of it in emergency medicine. I managed to help support both estranged families. I became competent in emergency work, competed in a triathlon and did well, and allowed God to finalize my spiritual direction. In October of 1987, on my 50th birthday, I chose Catholicism and the following Easter, I received the sacraments. I have been a daily communicant ever since. I spent more and more time in Blythe, California, where I purchased a fixer-upper, and by 1992 I was director of emergency services and chief of staff at our local hospital. In short order, corporate medicine entered, relieved me of my duties, and I, with a deep sigh and a prayer, reactivated SALUD. With God's help and the inspiration of Mother Teresa, I am able to flourish as a missionary physician, operating on donations so that no one is denied services, supplying medicine, procedures, advocacy, transportation, and food and shelter when otherwise unavailable.

A solid prayer group joins me for daily rosary to start and end each day. This SALUD is smaller and much quieter than the former, but it seems much more durable and acceptable. We receive good support from the community, and people are constantly donating money and recyclable items. I continue to admit patients to our hospital and receive good support from all the local physicians, and I try never to say "no" to them. With reluctance and in response to several issues with our corporate hospital management, I managed to reactivate a dormant healthcare district board by the grassroots method (thank you, Cesar!). I went

door-to-door to more than 6000 houses, informing the people that the doctors were not being permitted to run their own affairs and that the corporation was taking so much money out of the town that we were now deficient in many areas. In response and with a large boost from UFWOC pioneer, Alfredo Figueroa, we had the largest voter turnout in Blythe history and a landslide victory. Slowly, this new board is making changes and trying to right some injustices.

That, then, my friend, brings things up to date. I am indebted to you for this confessional of sorts. I am ever grateful for all that Cesar gave us as direction and inspiration in service to *La Causa*. And I am most grateful to God for giving this person a second chance, in the words of Gandhi, the chance to “look at my mistakes and retrace those footsteps.”

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DE COLORES