

Virginia (Jones) Rodriguez 1967–1976

It was the moment I had been waiting for—I read the three words, “*Viva la Causa*,” in a tiny help-wanted advertisement in the newspaper. At the time, I was working at my job as bookkeeper for a small grower in Helm in 1965 and all my senses went into alert mode.

The three words spoke volumes about my life’s experience and the restlessness it created within me up until then. Was my father not a farmworker, raising all eight children on his meager hourly wage? Was it not me he asked to fill out his daily time cards recording day by day what he earned? Was it not my responsibility to calculate his earnings every 15th day of the month, knowing there would never be enough to pay the grocery bill, let alone the other living expenses?

Did we not pick cotton while in grammar school every day possible in the fall months, suffering the humiliation of having to ask the bus driver to drop us off at whatever cotton field my mother told us she would be picking that day? Did we not pick grapes, prunes, and walnuts during the summer months while in high school?

I went to work in the farmworker movement in January of 1967. My very first act as a full-time volunteer was to attend a general meeting at Filipino Hall. It was there I heard Schenley workers who were covered by a union contract blasting the grower for not adhering to contract language. I was impressed by the power of what I heard.

Soon our small family—Nick, myself, and our daughter, Raquel, just six weeks old—were headed off to Portland, Oregon, to carry out the grape boycott campaign there (our son, Martin, would be born there). Like all the others, we had a list of contacts, an address of where we’d stay, and the knowledge that two other volunteers would join up with us there as well. That was the beginning of boycott work in many different cities, which involved spending long stretches of time away from home and family in California.

In that span of time, I would come to understand the UFW organization and its method of operation—as volunteers we were to adhere strictly to its mission and purpose and not stray beyond it. I would come to know and make lasting friendships with other boycott volunteers from the different cities—each with the same sense of purpose that I had, though they had never been farmworkers. Later, I would see that this experience would help many to become leaders, activists, and visionaries in other movements.

I came to understand that there was tremendous sympathy everywhere for the farmworkers’ cause—it was there waiting to be tapped into—and we were always seeking ways to turn that sympathy into action to help move the organizing forward.

It was an understanding that would serve me well in the future as I went to work in the broader labor movement as a union organizer. What I came to believe is that there will

always be those individuals who will respond to the outer edges of what needs to be done and who will step forward to take up responsibility for what is called for if change is to take place. In so doing, these people help move others to come along. It underscores the principle that if enough of us carry out a piece of what needs to be done, then change will most certainly come. The farmworker chant *Si se puede* says it well.