

Lucia Vazquez 1968–1981

The farmworker movement and/or the birthing of a union for farm laborers influenced many lives, inspired the Chicano movement, and changed a nation. My life and those of my family were included in the waves of change spread by the farmworker union. My father was a full-time volunteer for many years. When he decided to join the struggle to improve farmworkers' lives, he was a ranch hand with a third-grade education, and the father of nine. During his time of commitment to change and equality, he made many contributions. His commitment to Cesar and the movement and the duration of his volunteer service forced the family into an environment that enriched our lives. In this essay I hope to give a few examples of how the union influenced and continues to affect my family and the lives of many other union volunteers. Perhaps you may recognize yourself or other "activists" in my examples.

During our formative years, my two brothers (one younger and one older) and I and many other kids grew up within the movement. Along with others, we leafleted, picketed, marched, and if so compelled, fasted. For short periods we had absent fathers or mothers and sometimes were uprooted and moved with our families to another city or state to work on a campaign, a boycott, or even a recall. These relocations could last a few weeks, months, or years. I spent many summer days as a kid leafleting supermarkets, instead of swimming or riding bicycles. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that as a college student I came back to La Paz and volunteered summers.

Overall, I think we had pretty normal kid lives, though our surroundings and circumstances were perhaps a little different. Personally, I fought with my brother, was bitten by a dog, tried smoking at 13, and visited my grandmother every few months. The fights I had as a kid with my brother usually happened while picketing or leafleting in a grocery store parking lot. For example, we fought over who was going to get to talk to the next friendly or apathetic face, the lady who looked nice or the one driving the woody station wagon. "She's mine; I saw her first," or "This is my side of the lot; you go to the other entrance." I guess kids will be kids, whatever the circumstances.

The dog bite was really more of an embarrassing scratch from one of Cesar's guard dogs. It was not given by Boycott or Huelga, the incredibly well-trained German shepherds, but by Max, the old black dog that was going blind. It was time to go home after hanging out at the Chavez house. Usually, one of the kids would walk me to the gate to make sure the dogs didn't get out. I was trying to be cool in my new bellbottomed orange-striped pants that I had retrieved from the donation box. (What a find. The pants were kind of ugly in a cool way. One was happy to find something stylish that fit from the donation boxes.) I said I could show myself out. When I got to the gate, followed by Max, I picked up a Frisbee and tossed it away from the gate. Max was supposed to go after it so I could open and close the gate, no problem. I threw the Frisbee and turned to go, feeling very proud of myself. Muttering under my breath "stupid dog," I let out a high-pitched scream and

jumped up when Max's teeth ripped through my new pants and placed two scratches on my behind! My father still thinks this story is funny.

My point is that we still had relatively normal lives. Depending on a parent's current assignment, we had either absent fathers for short periods or we were uprooted and relocated, forced to start new schools and make new friends. If we were lucky, we were reunited with other families we were familiar with. Although there were always the new faces and of new volunteers, many of whom came to feel like family. We were a community.

I feel the benefits of this kind of life outweigh the negatives. As kids we learned to respect all kinds of people; to value the contribution each person could make regardless of age, nationality, education, or language skill. This we learned by example, time after time, working side by side with whoever happened to catch that work detail. We learned not to be afraid to speak up or to speak out or speak to anyone regardless of differences or celebrity status. Most important, we learned to make do and to appreciate what we had. To this day a "find" is a "find," whether it comes from a yard sale or from Ross.

We learned about the generosity of people and what people are willing to do when they believe in a cause. It was amazing to me how people would open their homes to us. They were so generous when we went to work in a new place. We were exposed to many new things. I can remember being in awe the first time I saw thick shag carpet, which was in a bedroom as big as our living room. OK, so I'm dating myself with the shag, but this was a big deal. I thought our family was worldly because we had just gotten our first vacuum cleaner. I couldn't believe that, one, people lived like that (this was way before lifestyles of the rich and famous); and two, they would open their homes to us. Someone they didn't even know, with a bunch of kids, no less. We were exposed to many people with a variety of different lifestyles, economic, religious, and culinary backgrounds.

The biggest lesson and gift was the knowledge that we were doing the right thing. The feeling that there was injustice and someone had to do something. That someone was us. It wasn't a mantra or a brainwashing, it was the example that was set by every person giving 100 percent. The commitment to working long hours in sometimes uncomfortable situations and doing something even though you were scared or didn't feel like it. You were part of a team, and the team had a higher purpose than just you. Of course, this insight comes in reflection. As kids we were not always happy to do what needed to be done. Most of us were around long enough to witness change, relish victories, and eventually grow up understanding the importance of the work we participated in. Many of the "union kids" still work in the union, as do some of their children.

I was pretty young for much of the early years, so names and dates are hazy. I will try to give one kid's view growing up in the movement. My first memories of "the union" include a trip to the Forty Acres shortly after it was acquired. I was 10 years old. At the time I couldn't understand what the big deal was. Most of the place was dusty and barren except

for the tumbleweeds and what used to pass for a gas station. It didn't even have sidewalks. We had to jump over a ditch just to get to the hoopla. I realized later in life what a big deal it was every time the union made a little headway in the struggle. It was an important victory every time a worker left the job and joined the picket line. It was amazing to me every time people showed up to march. That so many people were moved to protest in the streets. It was a victory for the boycott every time a grape or lettuce shipment was held up, and every time a grocer was convinced to take produce off the shelf. With every union election that took place and every contract that was won, ordinary people, "Mexicans," were exercising their power.

Every effort in the struggle made during those many years, every battle won or lost was part of history. We were changing the way people thought about farm laborers. The fact that the general public was even thinking about farm labor was important. And yes, having Forty Acres, from which farmworkers could create a union, eventually start a clinic, and build retired farmworker housing, was a very big deal.

Most of my personal contact with the movement from 1968 to 1970 had been big events like marches and rallies. I would sell buttons or help load food and Christmas stuff for striking families. The most memorable event was when thousands of people came to see Cesar end his first fast in Delano. Even I knew who Robert Kennedy was. He made a memorable and moving speech to a silent crowd. How many times in your life have you been with thousands of silent Mexicanos? Joan Baez had also come to sing for us. My younger brother, Carlos, was asked to hold the lyrics for Joan while she sang on stage. She sang about workers not having a name. This experience inspired my brother so much that he began playing the guitar. My brother became a very talented musician who donated much of his time playing cultural social commentary music.

The weekend of my twelfth birthday I spent in La Paz, union headquarters in California's Tehachapi Mountains. I met people of different ages, colors, and nationalities. They were from far-away places like Chicago, Michigan, and New York. This was a big deal for a girl from Goshen, population 2006. Later that year, the family moved to La Paz. My mom had grown tired of being a single parent. Depending on his assignment, my dad had previously come home for a weekend every three weeks or so. Now that Dad would be mostly in one place, we could join him. From Keene we took the bus to school with the other "La Paz kids"—the children of Cesar and Helen Chavez, of Dolores Huerta, of Lupe and Kathy Murguia, of the Encinas—the boys whose names all started with E's, to name just a few. That first summer, I had time for swimming and playing. When there was a priest in residence, we had Sunday mass on site. As we got older, many of us asked for afterschool jobs. Dad was a bodyguard and was traveling with Cesar much of the time.

My first afterschool job was in the morgue. The La Paz property was once a TB hospital. Over the last 30 years, office space has changed many times over. I spent my time after school with volunteers Ralph, Maria, and Ruth working on the Robert Kennedy Medical Insurance Plan. It was located in what used to be the morgue. My job was to help pull and

replace files. File numbers were color-coded with color dots. In the past, these volunteer staff had spent their time on picket lines and field duty. You worked where you were needed. It was important work. This was the first time farmworkers had ever had health insurance. Workers were now eligible for things like prenatal care and emergency health care. Filing was boring work. Every once in a while there would be union activity close by and we could participate in the more exciting picket line work.

In 1972, Joaquin Murguia, Liz Chavez, and I graduated from Jacobsen Junior High in Tehachapi. Events later that summer were much more memorable. Arizona governor Jack Williams, "One-Eyed Jack," had decided it was unlawful for farmworkers to strike. Apparently, every person in Arizona had the right to strike, but not farmworkers, especially those harvesting lettuce. This did not sit well with Cesar. Cesar began his second fast in Arizona. It was during this fast that a woman who came to show support for the cause again inspired me. During the fast, important people would come to the daily evening mass to show support. Much of the time I didn't know who they were or why they were important. Coretta Scott King was different. I was almost 14 and very impressed. She was pretty, with a creamy light brown complexion, and she wore a hat and white gloves. Though gentle and soft-spoken, she was not weak but strong and passionate without being loud or unruly. She had come to represent her late husband and everything Martin Luther King, Jr., had stood for. Her presence validated on some level the work we were doing. Even though many priests, sisters, and ministers were involved consistently, this minister's wife had brought us a blessing. She was different from the other women I had known in the movement. My family moved from La Paz to Phoenix to work on the campaign to recall the governor.

It was after this that things really heated up. There was violence in the fields and in the streets. People were dying. In Florida, Nan Freedman was hit and killed by a trucker while on early morning boycott duty. Nagi Defula, an Arab farmworker, was killed and dragged through the street in Earlimart. Juan de la Cruz, an older worker, was killed in the fields by a stray bullet. His funeral march was in Atwater. Volunteers and supporters were called to fast for the three days before the funeral. My family had moved back to the Central Valley of California. My father was working in the Coachella Valley. There were many things happening there as well. Stress was high. Details of the dangerous happenings in Imperial County were kept from me.

I attended high school while I participated in marches, funerals, and fasts. I wrote a paper on the National Labor Relations Board during my sophomore year. It was clear in my head that having a board where farmworkers with a dispute could get resolution fairly was a good thing. Memories of Cesar and Jerry Brown taking calm walks around La Paz were also relevant. It reinforced the idea that change takes time, commitment, and faith.

Years went by. During my college years, I coordinated Cesar's visit to the University of San Francisco campus. Even in graduate school, I somehow found the time to be politically active. Organizing students comes naturally: a Chicano graduation, bringing an injustice to

light, getting the vote out, supporting or becoming a candidate. To do something, to stand up for something, to say something just becomes the right thing to do.

I think most volunteers in the farmworker movement got back as much as they gave. Supporters always felt good about their contributions. Giving back is just part of life. I know that many of the union kids, La Paz kids or not, and union volunteers went on to do the good work—each in his or her own way. Some are doctors, lawyers, and politicians. In their own circles, they are known as “activists.” Here are some examples using some of my immediate family members: my sister Bernadette has served as campaign manager for various political campaigns; Carmen worked for two years getting a stoplight in her neighborhood; Gerardo served as president of his local union chapter for three consecutive years. My younger brother, Carlos, at age 23, fought a case in the state supreme court over a university ASB recall election. Marti is always making the effort to provide for someone’s specific need, whether it be shoes for deaf schoolchildren in Mexico, white shirts so Cambodian kids are eligible to attend school, or warm coats for the Indian reservation. Miguel continues to educate and send messages using his guitar and *musica del pueblo*.

It has been said that the union was built by the contributions of many people. This is true. I also think that anyone who was involved will agree that, through it all—the strikes, the fasts, the boycotts—it was the strength of Cesar’s convictions, the purity of his passion, the honesty of his words, and the compassion in his work that kept the rest of us going daily, honest and strong.

The skills and consciousness that we received from participating in the farmworker and Chicano movements have been integrated into our daily lives and passions. It has made us caring, strong, and proud. The waves of change, however small each one of us contributes, continue to change a nation.