

## Barbara Macri-Ortiz 1969–1990

I was one of the fortunate in history to come of age during the turbulent times of the 1960s. The war in Vietnam, the assassinations of President Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and other events had a profound impact on many of us and the life choices that we would make over the years. Surrounded by such chaos, the simplicity of the farmworker movement was refreshing. I was introduced to the farmworker boycott, walking picket lines, while a student at UC Santa Cruz. Later, during the summer of 1968, I had the opportunity to join a food caravan to Delano, and I was hooked.

As I look back on it now, the seeds that Cesar and Dolores planted in the early days of the farmworkers' struggle sprouted and grew in a climate of change, irrigated by the hopes and expectations of a generation. In spite of all obstacles and the incredible odds against success, the seed that was the tiny farmworkers' union survived and produced a bountiful harvest simply because of the sheer faith and commitment of the leadership and the army of volunteers who were recruited for the harvest.

The message was so simple and powerful. Don't buy or eat grapes and you will effect social change. It was so little to ask and the timing was right. So many citizens did not feel very good about the course of their nation. The boycott gave them an opportunity to actually do something to make a difference. Cesar's vision created a tidal wave, and the rest is history.

Some would say that the farmworker movement was built on sacrifices. Although that may be true, those of us who worked in the movement received so much that any sacrifices we made pale in comparison. There was so much opportunity for those of us willing to work hard for something other than money, and for me the opportunities have been phenomenal.

I literally grew up in the movement. I had the opportunity to work on the San Francisco boycott with three exceptional women: Dolores Huerta, Vivian Levine, and Jan Peterson. In those days the role of the woman in society was changing. What better role models could a young woman ask for? Besides, we had so much fun causing havoc in the Bay Area. Occasionally, we would be reined in by Fred Ross, Sr., but our energy and creativity were virtually unharnessed, and it showed in the results.

I will never forget our last picket line. We were at Safeway's distribution center in Richmond when Vivian broke the news that the boycott was over: John Giumarra and the rest of the Delano grape growers would be signing a contract. I remember the feeling ... We won, we actually won ... we finally won. It was amazing. We looked at each other stunned. The boycott was over. What now? What would we do with the rest of our lives? None of us quite understood then that there would actually be a role for us to play in the union after the boycott. We celebrated, and then went home exhausted, but satisfied.

Asleep for no more than a couple of hours, we were awakened with an invitation/order to go to Delano to witness the historic event—the signing of the contracts.

The next 20 years of my life consisted of one opportunity after another. There was no shortage of work to be done, and Cesar did not discriminate. Within a week of my trip to Delano, I found myself in Salinas. I was drafted because I spoke a little Spanish, and the lettuce workers, lobbying hard for their own opportunity, were preempted by grower-Teamster sweetheart contracts that were crafted to undercut the workers' legitimate efforts to organize under the banner of the UFWOC. A couple of weeks later, I was coordinating the strike activities of 1000 striking strawberry workers, as strike fever swept the Salinas Valley. What a challenge and what an opportunity for someone who had only been on this earth for 21 years.

Over the years, the challenges and opportunities grew. First and foremost, Cesar would call on the volunteers to fight the good fight in the cities, and I, like many volunteers, got the call from time to time for boycott duty. The boycott was hard work, oftentimes in freezing weather, but I had the opportunity to see the United States, or at least come to know the inside of the produce terminals and the coolers and parking lots of the major supermarkets in some 30 cities around the country, including Denver, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Birmingham, and Chicago. The best part of the boycott was winning, of course, but day to day, the organizing and getting to know and mobilize people around the country, and working with so many dedicated farmworkers and volunteers had its rewards. I could write a book ...

By far the most meaningful opportunities I had over the years were negotiating and administering the contracts that we fought so hard and so long to achieve. My first mentor in this area was Dolores Huerta. I was her assistant, and doubled as nanny for her infant daughter, Juanita, as we traveled around the state negotiating contracts and meeting with worker committees.

Eventually I was assigned to Delano to administer some 54 contracts in the Delano area. I was part of a team that included my future husband, Frank Ortiz, and the best man at our wedding, Joey Rubio. Together, we learned from scratch how to formulate and process grievances, implement seniority provisions, and operate the hiring hall. We spent every Sunday for at least two years training workers, teaching them the skills to be effective stewards and ranch committee members. It was hard work. It seemed like every time we finally had a trained committee, they would be laid off and disappear. But after a couple of years we had trained so many workers that they were popping up on all the ranches, and so our training actually mushroomed as the first wave of leadership mentored those who followed. The leadership we developed paid off in 1973, when the workers effectively shut down the valley in a general strike after the Teamsters stole their contracts, setting the stage for the ultimate battle for representation that would culminate with the enactment of the historic Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

The passion and love for the union that the workers exhibited in 1973 was understandable in light of the huge gains that they had made during the three years the contracts were in place. The hiring hall has gotten a lot of bad press over the years, but the simple fact is that through the administration of the hiring hall and seniority provisions in the contracts, we were actually able to stabilize the workforce. The sheer numbers of workers employed by the growers during the course of a year plummeted dramatically, as the seniority provisions kicked in. Workers began to exercise their seniority rights, moving from the harvest to the preharvest operations at the same farm and then back to the harvest, rather than jumping from one farm to another or leaving the area in search of work. The nine months or so of stable work in the grape vineyards changed lives dramatically for those workers who elected to invoke their seniority. Families stayed together, children stayed in school, and Delano and the surrounding towns sprouted fertile union populations.

The UFW contracts also delivered a medical plan to the membership and served as a catalyst for a new health-care system geared to the needs of Delano's farmworker population. The UFW contracts called for the growers to contribute to a medical plan for the workers. The medical plan, named after Robert F. Kennedy, was funded with a 10-cents-an-hour contribution by the employers for each hour worked by the farmworkers under union contract. Workers and their families could use the plan to receive medical treatment, but the problem then became one of access to quality health care. Historically, health care for workers in Delano had pretty much been nonexistent. For the few who actually saw a doctor, the treatment was usually marginal, and oftentimes bordered on malpractice. How would the workers use their newfound medical benefits in a local health-care system that was infamous for the marginal treatment and care delivered to the poor and ethnic residents?

As I would witness many times throughout my career with the UFW, Cesar had a vision and a plan to respond to the major problems faced by farmworkers. The Forty Acres became home to the Rodrigo Terronez Memorial Clinic. I participated in a vigorous, "Fred-Ross-style" house meeting campaign to educate the membership about various health-care options, including one we called the "\$2 plan," which was akin to a modern day HMO, whereby the participants would receive all their care through the clinic.

After an intense house meeting campaign that spread throughout the area, the workers voted overwhelmingly to apply the RFK contributions the growers made on their behalf to the health-care program offered at the farmworker clinic. The modest grower contributions to the RFK medical plan and the \$2 patient co-pays made it possible for the clinic to evolve into an impressive health-care provider for farmworkers in the Delano area. A cadre of young doctors, nurses, and health-care professionals staffed the clinic, named after an old-time Delano striker. I did not fully appreciate what we had accomplished until I was a boycott organizer in Detroit in 1973. A union representative down river who allowed me to speak to his membership about the boycott actually requested that I not talk about the UFW clinic program because it was so much better than what that union was able to offer its members.

Life for farmworkers in Delano was changing for the better. No longer did they have to show up for work at the start of the season with a bottle of tequila or other offerings for the foreman in order to get a job. Their date of hire determined their place on the recall list. No longer were they left guessing as to the wage rate they would actually receive. No longer did they have to worry about the foreman stealing some of the lugs of grapes they deftly harvested, or firing them if they complained about not getting their breaks or other worker protections and benefits that were spelled out in the contracts. No longer did they have to work when their health was at risk because pesticides had just been sprayed in the field. The workers had a union, complete with crew stewards and elected ranch committees who would work with the union representative to vindicate their rights through a contractual grievance procedure. Life for the contract administration team in Delano was also pretty good. Together with the farmworker leadership, we were coming of age. We had learned how to use paper and pen, how to research and prepare our grievances, how to argue and express ourselves in grievance meetings, and as a result, we were winning our grievances.

Life was good until the spring of 1973, when the Coachella growers and the Teamsters caused an earthquake that would rip apart the UFW contracts and all that had been accomplished in one grape growing area after another. I was sent to Coachella for strike duty, and would join the hundreds of farmworkers who were arrested for violating unconstitutional injunctions. Loaded onto Riverside County sheriff buses, we were processed, complete with fingerprints and mug shots. Some of the young farmworker women were scared and crying until others led the group in humming and singing union songs and other familiar tunes. The jailers packed us like sardines into tiny cells and taunted us with lunches that consisted of lettuce sandwiches (no kidding, nothing but lettuce, mayonnaise and white bread!). We reacted by declaring a hunger strike. The jailhouse soon became our turf (I think the strikers were about the only ones locked up), and before we knew it, they were actually begging us to leave after we refused to sign the promise-to-appear citations that were made a condition of our release.

Our legal team did a remarkable job during the 1973 strikes. I learned firsthand how important it is to have quality legal representation. Shortly after my release, I was falsely accused of having committed an armed robbery at a liquor store in Indio, after an eyewitness identified my mug shot as the “Mexican woman wearing a bandana” who drove the getaway car. I was never so scared in my life, thinking that some grower agent had framed me. Thanks to my lawyer, Sandy Nathan, and several young farmworker women who appeared in the lineup with me, I was finally allowed to leave the county after the eyewitness was unable to pick me out of that lineup. I was lucky. By the time of the lineup in July, I was a much slimmer version of my former self, having lost about 20 percent of my body weight, thanks to a frantic workload that kept us going around the clock.

Over the years there were times when we worked harder than others, but we always worked hard. Cesar had a way of pushing us to work hard and smart. Looking back, I

sometimes wonder how we were physically able to accomplish some of the things that we did as a matter of course. Cesar asked so much of us, but it was impossible to turn him down because no matter how hard we worked, he worked harder. He pushed himself more and demanded more of himself than he did of others. And whenever he smiled, gave you that look, and reminded you how important the mission, no matter how tired you were, you couldn't say no to the opportunity or the challenge of the moment.

Over the years I had the privilege to work with and know Cesar in a very special way because of the multitude of opportunities and challenges he passed my way. When my brother died in 1975, Cesar brought me back from the boycott in Pittsburgh and found a place for me to contribute in La Paz so I could be close to my family. I found myself running the union's accounting department with a staff of young people, including two extraordinarily talented high-school students, Cesar and Helen's daughter Liz, and Lupe and Kathy Murguia's son Joaquin. Together, these two teens reconciled scores of bank accounts every month, and still found time to do their schoolwork.

That summer we witnessed the historical enactment of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act and the flurry of elections that followed. Volunteers on the boycott returned to California and were disbursed throughout the state. I was dispatched to Livingston to work with a great group of organizers on the Gallo campaign. My assignment was quite a challenge: organizing a group of Punjabi workers who spoke little or no English or Spanish. UFW staff throughout the state experienced similar challenges as hundreds of elections were conducted in the early days of the law. So many elections were held that the ALRB ran out of money, and the UFW was pushed into another crisis. Dolores Huerta fought the battle in Sacramento, and I joined her again. The Sacramento experience left a bad taste in my mouth and set the stage for the "Yes on 14" campaign, an unsuccessful effort that would have effectively written labor law protections for farmworkers into the state's constitution.

In the midst of chaos, the ALRB managed to issue 131 election decisions in the first two full years of its existence, ringing the collective bargaining bell at many ranches throughout the state. Those of us in the union who had some collective bargaining experience were quickly put to work negotiating contracts and training staff and workers how to administer their contracts. I was eventually assigned to head up the arbitration division and found myself three days later successfully litigating three grievances for the Interharvest ranch committee. I spent the next few years crisscrossing the state from Napa to the Imperial Valley, Salinas to San Ysidro, and all points in between, training grievance committees, stewards, and staff, and representing the union and farmworkers in grievance meetings and arbitrations arising under our new contracts. Our success rate was quite impressive. Although the growers usually hired hot-shot lawyers to try their cases, Cesar and the board carefully screened the cases recommended for arbitration, and what we may have lacked in formal legal training was made up for by hard work and sheer preparation.

My experience in the union can be summed up in five words: hard work, preparation, and opportunities. Those of us who were willing to work hard and prepare ourselves for whatever the challenge were rewarded with awesome opportunities to grow, learn, and help people. Cesar knew no boundaries and was never intimidated, and that's the way he trained us. When he assigned me to run the legal department in 1980, he gave me one directive: rekindle the legal apprenticeship program so we could grow our own lawyers. Since then, five of us successfully completed the program, all passing the bar on our first attempt. We were proud to help one of our own, Marcos Camacho, who still serves the UFW as its general counsel, achieve a goal set by his father, a 1973 striker from Dinuba. While sitting in jail after being arrested for violating an injunction, Marcos's dad resolved to raise his son to one day become a UFW attorney. Thirteen years later Cesar hosted the first swearing-in ceremony at La Paz, and Mr. Camacho and his family witnessed a dream come true as U.S. District Court Judge Robert M. Takasugi swore in our first two graduates of the program, Marcos Camacho and Chris Schneider.

The other day I was asked whether the union's decline in the numbers of workers it represents was due to some flaw on the part of Cesar and the leadership to make the transition from fighting the growers on the strike lines and in the cities to working cooperatively with them in the administration of the contracts. Certainly, some mistakes and improvident decisions were made over the years. However, the bottom line is that Cesar never had the luxury to truly focus on contract administration and labor relations because the union was always being attacked on one front or the other. If it wasn't the Teamsters in Salinas, Coachella, or the San Joaquin Valley, it was the politicians in Sacramento or Washington, D.C., or the growers themselves. For example, in 1971 we had 250 contracts, more than 50,000 members, and all the trappings of success, but still there was enough fight in the growers to actually put out a contract on Cesar's life. Farmworker leaders and contract administrators were still persona non grata in pockets of the San Joaquin Valley that we nicknamed Dodge City because of the overabundance of firearms that were routinely flashed or discharged at Chavistas.

Many of the union growers, who were fiercely independent, were not ready to engage in serious labor-management relations or accept the UFW as a fact of life at their ranches. They were unable to recognize that the contracts actually added something positive to their operations, and instead set their sights on destroying the union. When the ALRA passed, few growers embraced it or allowed it to take hold and truly work. Instead, grower lawyers, labor consultants, and law firms dedicated to fighting the union mushroomed in every valley, intent on sabotaging the workers' legitimate efforts to make a better life for themselves and their families. The fierce war between the parties continued. Only now they fought on a different turf, and the weapons had changed: charges, counter-charges, objections, appeals, and delays were the new weapons of choice. The saying "justice delayed is justice denied," was painfully true to workers who grew old and gray before their cases were ever finally resolved. And after the election of George Deukmejian in 1982, the promise of the ALRA turned into a millstone around the union's neck as the law itself

became another weapon to attack the union rather than advance the farmworkers' efforts to achieve collective bargaining.

Cesar invariably had to operate in survival mode, but he consistently steered with a vision. He was always several years ahead of everyone, and for this talent, he was oftentimes misunderstood and second-guessed. Cesar led with compassion and took time to acknowledge the worth of all those around him, including the children. He taught by example, and expected us to learn quickly, retain what we learned, and move on to the next lesson. Cesar's demands were tempered by his sense of humor and his ability to make light of the most stressful situation, and take a break to play a game of handball or search out a good ice cream store.

I was very fortunate and will always be humbled by the opportunities I had to know and work with Cesar, Dolores, and the many wonderful people in the UFW. My experiences in the union and the lessons I learned would fill several books, if I ever had the time to record them. In the meantime, I recently had another opportunity to work with the UFW and the Pictsweet workers in their struggle to achieve a UFW contract here in Oxnard. So much has changed, but so much remains the same for the farmworkers and their struggles. I defer my thoughts on that experience for another chapter in the book I will probably never write ... For now, I get a thrill every time I affix a postage stamp with Cesar's smiling face on it. And it is all the more fun when the letter is addressed to certain opposing counsel. *Si se puede!*