

Leonie Fuller (Lomax) Graddy 1970–1975

My parents named me Leonie Augustina Fuller; at the time that I worked for the union my last name was Lomax, and, just to confuse matters (women do that), my last name is now Graddy. But everyone always calls me Nonie. I worked for the union as a full- and part-time volunteer for more than five years from 1970 to 1975.

I started working for the union in 1970 just before the Salinas strike started. I had studied Spanish in high school and in summer school in Monterrey, Mexico, after my junior and senior years. I also attended the University of the Americas in Mexico City, where I studied Spanish literature. Between living in Mexico and Salinas I was familiar with the plight of the Mexican working class. One day, after hearing Cesar speak, I decided to volunteer with the UFW. I went down to the union hall on Alisal Street in Salinas (before it moved to Wood Street) and found a group of people hanging out on the sidewalk unable to get in for lack of a key. I said I had come to help. When the guy with the key showed up, Fred Ross handed me the key and asked if I knew where to get it copied. I was back in half an hour with several copies. He then asked if I knew where they could get some cardboard for picket signs. I told him, "Sure, I'll be right back." I went off to one of the box-making companies and told them I was a Girl Scout leader (true) and needed cardboard for a project (also true). I was back again in less than an hour. The back of my car was filled with beautiful, clean white cardboard. Fred always thought I could do about anything after that. Fred's approval meant more to me than anyone else I worked with in the union. I had read about him and it blew me away just to meet him, let alone to have him think well of me. Bless you, Fred, I needed approval badly in those days, and you did wonders for my self-worth.

During the Salinas strike, I was assigned to check up on several picket lines and make sure they kept their cool. I went around with a Catholic priest whose name I can't remember. He was pretty young and a little shy and he always wore a black cassock, unlike some of the priests working with the union. We worked well together. Once we were standing with a group of picketers outside a labor camp off Natividad Road. We were waiting for the buses taking the scabs to the fields to come out. I looked over at Father and behind him was a *viuda*, a little old lady dressed all in black, waiting for the buses with a great big brick in her hand, ready to throw at the bus windows. I yelled, "Father, behind you!" He turned and pointed at her. If the hand of God had come out of the sky, she could not have had a more terrified expression on her face. I thought she would have a heart attack. She collapsed in a heap, but when the Father picked her up, she was fine. I can, to this day, see her terrified face in my mind's eye. It scared the devil out of the priest, too, as he had meant only to stop her, not judge her.

Another time, Father and I were outside the Sun Street Camp before sunup. We were waiting for the scabs to come out of the camp to get on buses. When they began to get on the buses, one of the strikers started poking an old man in the stomach with his flagpole, yelling at him not to get on. I ran over and grabbed the "stick," which turned out to be a

lead pipe. In that moment I learned a lot about myself. I knew I could back off or proceed. I proceeded, terrified. I grabbed the pipe from him (he was so startled he let go) and screamed at him that that was not the way to win the strike. He was a pretty big man, 5 or 6 inches taller than I, but he backed down as if I were the bigger and stronger of the two. He apologized and said it was so hard to watch the people going to work day after day. I agreed with him and said that we would just have to keep coming back until the strike was won. He asked if I would continue also and I assured him I would. The next summer I transferred down to the San Luis, Arizona, field office. He walked in the office one day and came up to me and asked me if I remembered him. I assured him I did. He said he thought I had quit and that he was glad to see me *siempre luchando*. He introduced me to his friends and his wife as the woman who kept him from going to jail. His wife invited me home to dinner and made a big fuss over me. They invited me to dinner several times that winter, and I went to their house for Christmas Eve. When you live on \$5 a week, a free meal is a wonderful thing.

In San Luis there were three women I especially liked. They would hang out in the union hall with me on the days that they failed to find work. One evening about 6 p.m., they came into the union hall laughing together. I was surprised to see them at that hour. They said they just had to come in before they went home to tell me what they did that day. I was surprised because their days are so long when they find work. They get up at 3 a.m. to make breakfast and lunches. They leave the house by 4 a.m. to get to the buses by 5 to be in the fields by 7. It was a two-hour bus ride out to most of the fields they worked in near Yuma. They generally didn't return to the border until 5 or 6 in the evening, only to go home to make dinner and try and get some sleep, to start the whole thing over the next morning. Anyway, they had a tale to tell. When they had gotten on the *contratista's* bus, they realized there was no drinking water or portable toilets following the bus. They proceeded to organize the workers on the bus. When they got to the field outside Yuma, the whole crew sat down and refused to work without water and toilets. The *contratista* had no choice but to go back into Yuma, an hour trip each way, and bring back water and toilets.

Even if we didn't win every strike, we did teach an awful lot of people the power of organizing and solidarity.