

Khati Hendry 1970-1971, 1974-1975

UFW Memories

Berkeley: 1970-1971

Grape House. I grew up East of the Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s, and had only heard of the farmworkers' union and Cesar Chavez distantly. When I arrived in Berkeley in 1970, taking a leave from university to experience life outside its walls and furious at the country's power structure and the Vietnam War, I met people working out of the "grape house" in Oakland. John Cama (a slight blond man with a love of jazz) and his friend Ron Kelly filled me in on the boycott and drafted me into various events. The house, at the end of a street next to the freeway, was disheveled, and something was always going on.

Trip to Salinas. Ron invited me along on a trip to Salinas in late 1970, where Cesar was going to speak. I believe this was part of the lettuce boycott. We stopped by a house that I think was the site of a clinic, where Margaret Murphy (not sure about this) was, and also went to the farmworker kitchen set up for the strikers, organizers, and rally-goers. They served up something referred to as "elephant" meat, which was the hottest food I had ever eaten in my life. I don't recall just what Cesar said, but I was impressed by the energy, enthusiasm, determination, and caring of the assembly. We spent the night on someone's floor, and drove home through Castroville—my first look at the artichoke capital of the world (not to mention strawberries). In Salinas, I first heard "*Huelga en General*," and got a copy of the lyrics. I determined to learn Spanish and memorized the song as a first step, which I can sing in its entirety to this day.

Parking lot epiphany

Back in Berkeley, I was passing out leaflets in the Safeway parking lot on Shattuck and Adeline Street (now the Berkeley Bowl), urging people not to shop there and trying to figure out what to do with my life. It was ridiculous to think that I would be an organizer of farmworkers myself—who was I to have such arrogance? And yet did I want to spend my life passing out leaflets in parking lots? I reflected on the fact that I had advantages of having done well in school and parents who could send me through education, and if I had grown up a farmworker, what would I want? Why, some of the advantages I already had. If I really wanted to support the farmworkers' struggle, I would use my particular opportunities and skills to contribute to *La Causa*. Through serendipitous events, I had become involved in the Berkeley Free Clinic and Women's Health Collective and thought I could become a doctor and work in a farmworker clinic like the one in Delano. And so the UFW changed the course of my life.

Calexico: Summer of 1974

And so, two years of pre-med in Massachusetts and a year of medical school at UCSF later, I finally had my opportunity to work directly with the union. The summer after that first year of med school, I signed on as a volunteer at the clinic in Calexico for two months. I had no idea really where I was going when I got on the bus, which took forever, and made a switch in a town I never knew existed, the date capital Indio, before landing in the sun-bleached border town of Calexico. I stayed in a spartan but friendly apartment house with other volunteers. Once I thought a bus had rammed the side of the house, but it was only an earthquake.

Calexico staff

The clinic was run almost entirely in Spanish, as was the entire town of Calexico. Some of the people I remember: Juanita, the plump, pleasant, monolingual Spanish administrator. Miki worked in the lab—she had a child at age 15, who was then six years old, and it occurred to me that there were actually advantages to getting that “over with” early, before you knew any better, and still having the rest of your life in front of you. Miki taught me to weave bracelets of black rubber rings around my hand, paint toenails with purple glitter polish, and smile a lot. Yoli was the slender blonde medical assistant who, like many staff, commuted across the border from Mexicali every day for work. She was always beautifully coiffed and dressed, which seemed like a miracle when I finally visited her tiny house. The nurse was, I think, Katie Doyle. I can see her face and straight dark hair, but am not sure of the name any more. I believe she was a nun at some point. John Taylor was a large young man with sandy brown hair who helped me with my Spanish and filled me in on the union politics. Marshall Ganz came down to help organize a big rally with Cesar as guest speaker, and I met him briefly in a couple of planning meetings. Oscar Mondragon was also in Calexico and was a local organizer. Dan Boone was one of the lawyers who lived in the apartment below me in the UFW lodgings; I met him again years later when he helped defend a coworker in a grievance through SEIU. I think that Ken Frisof was there, along with his wife, who was a nurse. John Cummings was a large, enthusiastic doctor who lived somewhere else in California (maybe San Diego) and came out occasionally to volunteer.

Panic in the delivery room

The clinic was in a one-story medical office next to the tiny local hospital at what was then near the edge of town. The check-in area is where the patients were screened for eligibility, based on their work records I believe, although I don't know the details. We had a small lab that could draw samples, do microscopy and hematocrits, and I'm not sure about cultures. There was a small pharmacy, which was stocked with samples and medications we ordered. After one year of medical school, I did not have the skills to attend to patients directly, so I helped prepare medicines. Looking back, it was under the vaguest of supervision, but what did I know of regulations? There were three or four exam rooms, with the usual supplies, and charts on all patients. The doctor had some hospital responsibilities, and would see patients who needed to be admitted in the neighboring hospital, as well as do deliveries. One morning we heard about a very difficult delivery the

previous night—the doctor had had a hard time getting the baby delivered and the APGARs were terrible, although I don't think the baby died. I just recall that it was quite traumatic, and there was basically no backup available. The other doctors in the community were not friendly to the clinic, from what I understood, and it must have been stressful for the UFW volunteers.

Spanish language

When I was not helping in the clinic, and even when I was, I was learning Spanish. I had six class meetings in medical Spanish at UCSF, knowledge of French, and a *Teach Yourself Spanish* book. My method of choice was to read *Los Agachados* by Ruiz, a political comic book from the point of view of the man in the street in Mexico, writing down at least 50 words I didn't know each day and looking them up. This resulted in knowledge of Mexican slang (*p'os*) and questions to the staff about words such as *pendejo* or expressions such as *hijo de la pelona*. The clinic people told me about famous misuse of Spanish by the volunteer doctors too. Dr. John Cummings had a thick American accent but tried hard. One day a farmworker came in complaining of a skin lesion on his arm, which he described as a “*esta chin---era*.” When John later saw a woman with a similar lesion, he proudly exclaimed, “*Señora, yo veo que Usted tiene una chin---era aquí!*” She was mortified, as was the doctor when he found out what he had said.

Music

One of the treasures I acquired at some point was a copy of a tape of farmworker songs recorded live, I don't know where. It includes among others “*Adelita*” (including the part with “*Ay como me gusta la paranda y beber-que hare par' anamorar a esta perfida mujer....*”), “*De Colores*,” “*Las Mananitas*,” and a description of the “*Plan de Delano*.” I still have it.

Bus burning

One of the events that occurred before I arrived was the burning of a contractor's bus. There were court proceedings at some stage and rumors about who might have been involved. Certainly the feelings ran high. *El Malcriado* was another source of news, and the staff was on a campaign against *La Madrugadera*—the system that required workers to show up as early as 3 in the morning in an attempt to get work that day. They would hang out for hours and might never be chosen to work. I think that was part of the campaign to get a union and hiring hall going, to have a more rational method of work distribution.

Cesar's visit

In order to rally the workers in the Imperial Valley to the union organizing efforts, Cesar planned to come to Calexico that summer of 1974. The preparations included leaflets, decorations (I worked on the black *aguilas* that adorned the roof of the park gazebo), and so on. At one of the meetings, the planners wanted to have pretty girls work the crowd

selling buttons. When one of the women present objected to the sexism of the proposal, Marshall told her in not the nicest tone, “one revolution at a time.” That was a source of friction, but everyone still worked to make the rally come off—flags, cheers, speeches, crowds, emotion. It amazed me that instead of Calexico being a remote, rural spot in the middle of nowhere, it was really right in the middle of the action.

Heat

Calexico is really HOT. One morning we went out to one of the melon fields to demonstrate with flags and slogans, and it was hot even in the early hours. I couldn’t imagine working to pick anything, much less melons, in that kind of heat, and developed a greater respect for the work done in the fields.

Mexicali

On the other side of the border from Calexico is Mexicali. In those days, it was a block or two of tourist shops, a couple more of a business district, and the rest huge tracts of dirt roads and *colonias*. There was supposedly a clinic in Mexicali (Tina Solinas mentioned this in a listserv email), but I never met anyone who worked in it or saw it. The most lasting visual memory of the relationship between the two cities was that of cardboard and cast-off wood shacks literally plastered against the chain link fence on the Mexican side, with a golf course on the other side in the U.S.

Trip to San Diego

Occasionally patients would need referral out of Calexico. There was an elderly woman with congestive heart failure who needed to see a specialist, and one of the volunteer doctors at the clinic had managed to get an appointment for her in San Diego. I was the medical transport service and drove her all the way there to the hospital. We talked along the way, and she mentioned that she was sad that her children were not keeping up their Spanish skills. After a couple of months in the Imperial Valley, San Diego looked like the Emerald City—everything big, busy, rich, and far from what was available to us in Calexico. The disparity was striking.

Returning to San Francisco

When I came back to San Francisco for the second year of med school, I was shocked as the bus rolled into the city. I had always thought San Francisco was beautiful, but what I saw was a lot of concrete.

Calexico: Fall of 1975

In the fall of 1975 I returned to Calexico, this time with more experience and able to attend to patients under physician supervision. I managed to get a community health elective for a

month, with the doctor filling out the preceptor papers. It is possible I have the 1974 and 1975 doctors mixed up, but I think that Tom Lambert was the name of the doctor working at that time. He was a slight, gentle, young, brown-haired man who worked long hours in the clinic and hospital. The clinic was still seeing patients regularly, and my time was spent either observing patient visits or seeing some of the simpler cases myself, so the emphasis was on getting the care right.

Living in Mexicali

This time I spent more time across the border in Mexicali, staying for a while in an organizer's house in Baja California, which was empty most of the time. I remember visiting Yoli's family, and was impressed that the front room was filled with a large bed, the bedroom was filled with two beds, and the kitchen was in the back of the house, partly outdoors. In all, about 10 people lived there, two or more to a bed with the rest sleeping on the floor. When I told them I was staying by myself down the street, they wondered if I wouldn't get lonely, and cheerfully invited me to come stay with them anytime: "We have plenty of room!" This is the same Yoli who was always impeccably dressed at work, while I was rather grubby. When I crossed the border with my borrowed bike every day, I began to experience a bit of what most of the clinic staff and farmworkers went through every day. I can't imagine how it must be today—surely very different with the big fences and homeland "security" now in force.

Beyond Mexicali is a huge dry lake known as the Laguna Salada, and beyond that is ultimately San Felipe on the Gulf of Cortez. To the west are the Rumarosa mountains, dry brown hills with deadly highway curves adorned with crosses and flowers. Beyond that is the high, cooler desert on the way to Tecate. A beautiful part of Aztlan.

Visit to Tehachapi

I went along with several clinic staff to a meeting with Cesar in Tehachapi to talk about the future of the clinics and concerns people had. It must have been about October of 1975. I didn't know that it had been a TB sanitarium, but remember that it was in a beautiful spot, downhill a bit from the road. We met in a large meeting room in what I thought was a house, with maybe 30 people or more. John Radebaugh from the Sanger clinic was there and quite a spokesperson. The politics were beyond me, but I recall that the clinics were emphatic on the value of the services and distressed by directives from the union that made it difficult for them to continue. Although the clinic people tried earnestly to make their concerns heard, they were not pleased with the responses. It felt quite tense and sad. Perhaps someone else who attended that meeting could provide more insight. I know that the clinics did not last too long after that meeting, because they were long gone by the time I graduated from residency in 1980.

UCSF Boycott

Naturally, back at UCSF we had a support committee for the boycott. I remember reading *Factories in the Fields* by Carey McWilliams to get more perspective on the union efforts. The support committee was mostly made up of medical students, but there were some nursing and other people as well, and we were assigned to a UFW staff person named Juan. Our focus was on the student union, Milberry, which had a cafeteria. The campaign was to get iceberg lettuce out of the cafeteria, and we picketed, handed out leaflets, negotiated with the manager, got articles in the student paper, *Synapse*, and had some success. In those days, salad was synonymous with iceberg most of the time, and they introduced other types of greens as a choice. We also joined in the Gallo wine boycott, targeting the mom-and-pop corner stores in the neighborhoods around the medical center. We actually got several of them to pull the Gallo off the shelves.

Postscript

I continued to work on my Spanish, and after residency in family practice in Seattle, took the “perfect job” at La Clinica de la Raza in Oakland, with the *aguila* in the logo. One of the attractions was the community health education (Casa CHE) section, which organized the community on a variety of issues using the Paolo Friere “pedagogy of the oppressed” model, so my work would be linked with a larger mission. As it happened, there were internal problems, and we ended up organizing the workers at the clinic into one bargaining unit in SEIU Local 535 and negotiated a contract with the first salary structure the clinic ever had. Lots of stories there.

Continuing in the spirit of improving community health, I was working with the single-payer initiative, Proposition 186, in the early 1990s. Knowing it is not enough to see people who need health care on an individual basis, I was passing out flyers in a parking lot at Costco when I had a flashback to 1970 when I was handing out UFW leaflets in the Safeway parking lot, deciding to go into medicine to contribute more. Now I was doctor, but still handing out leaflets in a parking lot trying to make a difference. I really felt I had come full circle.

I’m sure that many people involved in the UFW clinics continue in community health circles today. I saw Ken Friso’s name mentioned as a leader on single payer somewhere back East, and I met Kate Colwell from the Contra Costa Health Department clinic in Richmond only to find out she worked in a UFW clinic. She told me about the documentation project. I hope more people can contribute other memories from those years when the clinics were an inspiration to those of us wanting to work for a better, healthier life for all through social action.