

Graciela Cisneros 1971-1973

It was the late 1960s, as if that can explain everything. In some ways, it can. There was an alignment of mysterious forces.

My involvement with the United Farm Workers began in 1969. I was in the first group of minority students admitted to the University of Washington by the Educational Opportunity Program. It was a time of many firsts.

I read about scabs and solidarity, the history of the union movement, Joe Hill, community organizing, Saul Alinsky, nonviolence, social change, and armed revolution.

The plight of the farmworkers embodied the political, social, and economic injustices that Hispanics experienced in this country. I picketed and passed out leaflets. I was righting injustices.

During the winter quarter of 1971, I was a Washington state legislative intern. My self-appointed mission was to monitor the grower-sponsored anti-farmworker legislation introduced by Rep. Irving Newhouse, a Yakima Valley hops grower. UFW vice president Larry Itliong testified at the legislative hearing, which was packed with farmworker supporters. The bill did not pass, thanks to the Democratic leadership of the Senate.

In the summer of 1971, I interpreted for a medical team that tested farmworkers and their children living in company-owned housing for nitrate poisoning. I saw intolerable camp conditions. I was spending a lot of time in the Yakima Valley, the spiritual home of Washington Chicanos.

Then in the late summer, the Yakima Valley Hop Strike of 1971 began. It was hot. It was spontaneous combustion. Workers were walking out left and right. Nightly meetings were held in the small town of Granger. On-the-spot contracts were negotiated. Five others and I were arrested at the Patnode Hop Farm. Then the harvest was over and many of the farmworkers left and went on to the next crop.

After the trespassing trial, I signed up for the five bucks a week. I thought I might as well get paid for what I was already doing. Besides, going back to school at this point would be anticlimactic. It wasn't until 2002 that I found out our trial made case law for the right of farmworkers to organize (*Garza v. Patnode*, 65 Lab. Cas. (1971) Washington State).

I gave away most of my possessions and took a 27-hour Greyhound Bus ride from Seattle to Bakersfield. Ruth Shy picked me up and drove me to La Paz, union headquarters. I was introduced to the big names. The people who gave orders, made decisions, talked with Cesar on a daily basis. I was in the magical mountain kingdom called La Paz. Jon Lewis gave me a copy of his book *From this Earth of the Delano Grape Strike*. I still have the book.

My first assignment was as manager of *Los Peregrinos De La Causa*, a musical theater of striking San Ysidro tomato workers. Ernie Powell was the advance man. There was another woman on tour with us who told "sex in the vineyard" stories.

I'd met Ernie earlier in the summer when I had gone to visit relatives in Chula Vista. We passed out leaflets at the San Diego Zoo and talked union; that was the thing about the union—you had instant friends everywhere.

Our group traveled to every union office from Calexico to Salinas, performing songs and stupid-grower skits. Of all the songs, the only line I remember is "*Ya llevo la aguililla negra, de tenganse gavilanes.*" I traveled with the group--navigating, translating, handling money, and mostly babysitting a grumpy group. There was lots of driving. I slept on a dirty cot in a hot Quonset hut filled with creepy, crawly, flying things. I'd wake up sore as hell from sleeping on union hall cement floors. In Delano I got to spend time with Filipino farmworkers, old men bound together by the law prohibiting them from marrying.

The big drama of the tour came when the Peregrinos got drunk, spent the night in jail, and had to be bailed out the next morning. We got help from Father Joe in resolving the real problem: we needed a break. He arranged for us to spend a day playing in Kings Canyon. My first introduction to nature as the Great Attitude Adjuster.

The tour ended. I don't know what happened to Los Peregrinos. Ernie Powell ran a dating service in Bellevue, Washington, several years later. I was sent to the Willamette Valley farmworker field office in Woodburn, Oregon.

After the Yakima Valley Hop Strike, the union opened farmworker field offices in Washington and Oregon. Lupe Gamboa and Ricardo Trevino stayed in the Yakima Valley to lead the organizing efforts. Lupe had introduced me to the concept of union when we were students at the U of W. It started with his dog, Huelga--strike as in workers, not lightning.

Fred Ross and Jim Conroy organized farmworkers in the Willamette Valley. I had worked with Fred in Seattle. He was part of the gang from California who had replaced Jan and Dale Van Pelt. After I learned the art of house meetings from Fred, he left to organize farmworkers in Idaho. Jim Conroy, the priest, left shortly afterwards. He was going through the discovery of non-priestly emotions involved in sex and fatherhood.

I was left to organize farmworkers in the Willamette Valley. I knew I could talk to anyone about anything and nothing, and that was what made me a good organizer, but now I was doing it in Spanish. Our first local issue was the wages paid for strawberries. Bob Purcell researched the economics of strawberries to tell us how much of a wage increase we could ask for. We followed the union format--a series of small house meetings cumulating in a large group meeting. We never got a wage increase, but we stirred people's imagination.

The union was a good place for workaholics; it was nonstop play-work-work-play. There was no difference between the two, it was life.

I shared the union house with Bob Purcell, Pat Degan, Steve Sady, and Barbacoa. Pat taught me about brown rice and veggies, Steve built me a chicken coop, and Barbacoa was my pet goat. Another thing of interest about Woodburn was the Russian religious sect that dressed in traditional garb. I had never seen such a thing.

In between organizing farmworkers, we made frequent visits and collaborated with the Portland boycott office, where Nancy Welch worked. I'd met Nancy in Seattle, where she had worked with the Seattle boycott. At the Portland office I ate horsemeat; it was cheap and didn't taste bad. I tasted myzithra cheese and was entertained to no end by the antics of Donald Orange, a fellow Portland boycotter.

We participated in the national campaigns. We did the farm bureau vigil, crashed the Republican headquarters with farmworker faces, and took a caravan to Phoenix to watch Cesar break his fast. The only time the situation seemed so beyond me was when a farmworker wife, crying, confided she could no longer stand her husband's demand for blood during sex. I didn't have time for this intimate conversation. I had to get her in the car; we were on the way to Phoenix. Nancy reminded me this was the same couple that had some flirtatious tiff on the way back.

Some of our local efforts included crashing the strawberry-picking machine demonstration in Wilsonville with shouts, flags, signs, and general scene-making. "Machines, No! Workers, Yes!"

We entered a UFW float in the annual Woodburn Parade and won a blue ribbon for first place. We were surprised, but it showed the support we had in the community.

On the other hand, the Woodburn police arrested one of our volunteers at a Mexican dance in the National Guard armory, where we had set up a voter registration table. I guess voting was more of a threat than a parade entry.

The next thing we knew, we were called down to California to work another "now-more-than-ever" campaign. At first I organized support in cities south of L.A. Then I became one of the many sign-holders who every morning were given lunch bag and bused to an L.A. freeway ramp. We spent the day holding signs, standing on fake grass, breathing fumes, and eating cold macaroni sandwiches. I conversed with the drivers and passengers through body language. It was mime. It was fun.

At night, we slept on the floor of a curtainless room with only the window between us and the nightly sounds and lights of the police helicopter searching the barrio.

It was a hard campaign. We won. As a bonus, we were given extra bucks.

After the official celebration, a group of us took off to San Felipe. We took over the town, got drunk, and vomited on the beach. We had a wonderful time, then it was back to Oregon. The office was shut down, and Lupe Gamboa and I were being sent to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This was the beginning of the end.

We were the last of the boycotters to head east that year. We were given a list of supporters who had volunteered to house boycotters heading east. Our first night out in Flagstaff was troubling. We weren't turned away, but it was awkward. They had thought there wouldn't be any more boycotters coming through.

Then there was the welcoming supporter in New Mexico, who made us peanut butter-and-raisin sandwiches for the road. I watched her spread peanut butter on the bread as cockroaches scattered off the breadboard. We thanked her and tossed the sandwiches out at the nearest McDonald's.

We stopped at the St. Louis boycott house and enjoyed sharing union stories with Nancy Welch.

We got to Pittsburgh before Christmas. It was a new world. Home of the Steelers, the steelworkers, miners--an industrial center at the confluence of three rivers.

We replaced Bill, a very burned-out boycotter. We lived in a house with a bunch of wackos. I was miserable. My world was beginning to unravel. I left and Lupe stayed. I came back and Lupe left.

Slowly I built up my own group of supporters. As in Portland, there was a group of old commies (when you're in your 20s, 50- and 60-year-olds seem old) that you could depend upon to support farmworker activities. We carried out the directives of the union: leafleting, picketing, fasting, public speaking, carrying the message of the farmworkers' right to organize.

In September of 1973, I flew to California to read a section of the farmworker constitution at the first United Farm Workers Constitutional Convention. I got to be on stage with Ted Kennedy and Joan Baez, but the real thrill came when I saw Washington state farmworker faces in the audience of this historic event.

Pittsburgh weather consisted of bitter winter winds, humid summers, and amazing spring storms with bands of lightning punctuated by deafening thunder. Cars rusted from the street salt. This was a strange place in which salmon was an expensive delicacy. In the fishing village I came from, only poor fishermen ate salmon. I saw ghettos and ethnic neighborhoods. Because of that, I know exactly the kind of place where Stephanie Plum, the female bounty hunter, lives and works. We spent a month eating Kraft prepackaged grilled-cheese sandwiches. We had a great lawyer, Paul Boas. There were air-pollution alerts advising pregnant women and children to stay indoors. I was glad to have a friend at the

other end of the state in Ruth Shy, who ran the Philadelphia office. We traded staff to accommodate romances

I don't know what happened, but one morning I woke up and couldn't figure out why I should get out of bed. I was exhausted. I wrote to Cesar, asking to be relieved. I was replaced and flew back to Washington.

When I think about my time with the union, I'm not sure that youth, personal relationships, and working for the farmworkers was a good mix for me, but I wouldn't have wanted to miss the adventure.