

Nancy Hickey Hughes 1971–1976

Unionizing Florida's Farmworkers

It was the fall of 1971 and I was fresh out of the University of South Florida in Tampa with a degree in sociology. I stopped by to see Richard Gagan, a former professor of mine, who asked whether or not I had found a job. Since I had not, he invited me to his home to meet his wife, Suzanne, and someone else. The someone else turned out to be Manuel Chavez, Cesar's cousin, who had recently arrived to organize farmworkers in the Sunshine State.

I grew up in Florida but was ignorant of the plight of farmworkers and the deplorable conditions under which they lived and worked. But, as a new full-time volunteer with the UFW, I was quickly educated. Manuel made me his "administrative assistant" and I earned \$5 per week plus room and board. We had many wonderful volunteers, including Jose Luna and Pancho Botello, California farmworkers; Ramon Romero and Ramon Rodriguez, Florida farmworkers; Judy Petersen, our legal counsel, who had just passed the Florida Bar exam; Rick Culp, a Mennonite from Pennsylvania; Orrin Baird from Chicago; Huey Tague from New York; John Burns, via the Peace Corps in Africa; the Gagan family; the Reverend August VandenBosch; Marshall Barry, an economics professor from New College in Sarasota; and my future boycott coworker, Robbie Jaffe, another USF graduate.

There were many highlights during the UFW's years in Florida, such as the first Florida farmworker "convention" held in Tampa and attended by laborers who picked oranges for Coca-Cola's Minute Maid Company. The farmworkers were astonished that they were actually being asked to list problems they were having in the groves and in the labor camps and what changes were needed. This information was used in later contract negotiations and to set up the union hiring halls. I was lucky enough to spend time at the hiring hall in Ft. Pierce with Jose and Pancho, who were very sweet and tried to teach me some Spanish. It was there I found out that pinto beans and tortillas make a really good breakfast (and lunch ... and dinner).

Another highlight was the first union election and contract with Coca-Cola. Our staff ventured into the groves and talked with the workers about the benefits a union could provide. It was easy to obtain signatures on the National Labor Relations Board cards, as the workers were enthusiastic about having a union. After all, the growers had their union (Florida Farm Bureau), why shouldn't the workers have one, too! The NLRB election cards were counted and authenticated at Coca-Cola's headquarters in Auburndale in 1972. I was proud to be in attendance when the results were certified and the UFW was declared the union to represent Coke's farm labor. The immense importance of this event was brought home to me probably 25 years later when I read an article in the local paper that Coca-Cola was trying to locate some former Minute Maid farmworkers as they were due retirement benefits.

Another memorable event was our participation at the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach. It began with George McGovern joining a picket line of striking truck drivers from a sugar cane processing plant in South Bay. We then divided our staff into pairs to lobby the state delegations regarding the lettuce boycott. Our lobbying was so good and our cause so just that on the convention floor, on live national television, we saw and heard New York cast their vote for the Democratic presidential nominee and also declare “New York, the state that boycotts lettuce.” We could not believe our ears! This was beyond our wildest dreams! Then the farmworker spirit snowballed and other states publicly joined *La Causa*. Unfortunately, Nixon was re-elected, and we all know what happened after that. Subsequently, the UFW’s table grapes contracts expired in California, the growers signed “sweetheart contracts” with the Teamsters union, and the national boycott of grapes resumed. Most of our staff in Florida were sent to Ohio under the leadership of Eliseo Medina to help organize the national boycott, and, sadly, the drive to organize Florida’s farmworkers had to take a back seat.

Boycotting In Ohio

I was 24 and had never lived in a big, industrial city like Cleveland and found the city and the people fascinating. I had also not had the opportunity to do much public speaking but quickly learned as we gave many presentations at schools, churches, organizations, union meetings, etc. in an effort to recruit volunteers, solicit donations, and educate the public in hopes that they would support the boycotts. BOYCOTT LETTUCE, BOYCOTT GRAPES, BOYCOTT THE WINE THAT GALLO MAKES.

After a few months I was sent to Akron to coordinate our efforts. We were given free office space by John Looney in the basement of his Humanity House, the local headquarters for the American Friends Service Committee. Northeastern Ohio had many unionized steel, tire, and auto workers, and we became experts at gate collections that involved arriving in the wee hours of the morning with a lot of volunteers to ask the workers for donations on their way into and out of the factories. We were very successful at raising money, especially Dick Wiesenhahn, a salesman for MacGregor Golf Clubs, and Patty Teufel, a nun on sabbatical and assigned to the National Farm Worker Ministry.

An interesting anecdote. Cesar came to Ohio for speaking engagements and we were trained to be observant of the audience as death threats were always a possibility. I noticed that the same man appeared in three different cities on the same day where Cesar was speaking. When at the end of the final speech, he began to hurriedly approach Cesar through the crowd, I attempted to block his path with my skinny self between this husky man and Cesar. Thankfully, he was just an avid fan determined to shake Cesar’s hand!

At one point, all of our Ohio staff gathered in Dayton for training by Fred Ross. It was an honor to have such a respected figure teaching us the art of conducting house meetings and organizing a grassroots campaign. For fun and to take a break from training, we picketed a local Fazio’s grocery store regarding non-union grapes. Of course, we were all

excellent picketers and were convincing many shoppers to turn away from Fazio's. We had done nothing illegal but were threatened with arrest if we did not leave. As we did not want to interrupt our training schedule, we began to leave, but our vehicles were blocked by the police and we were all arrested. We sang "God Bless America" and union songs in the paddy wagon on our way to jail. When our one phone call was granted, we each contacted a different newspaper, radio, and TV station. It wasn't long before the negative publicity led Fazio's to remove all of the non-UFW grapes from their Ohio stores. We still had to appear in court the next day. This was during the impeachment of President Nixon and one of our staff just happened to be named Richard T. Nixon, known to us as Rick Nixon. When the court clerk read, "The State of Ohio verses Richard Nixon," even the judge laughed.

Another major event was the UFW's first national convention. Our journey to California began with the arrival of a very old bus that in a former life had belonged to Greyhound. Staff from Ohio, Chicago, and St. Louis piled in, and we barely stopped for food and bathroom breaks until arriving in Fresno, where we slept in the open air at the city park. It was very rewarding to see the look of amazement on the farmworkers' faces at the union convention where they were actually being allowed to vote for representatives and issues affecting their lives. Following the convention, we went to La Paz, the UFW headquarters, a former TB sanitarium in the beautiful hills, where we danced, took quick showers with no hot water, watched the movie "Klute" and celebrated UFW's accomplishments.

My final experience as a full-time volunteer with the UFW was in 1976 when I went back to California to work on a legislative ballot initiative to allow farmworkers the right to vote for a union. We spent many hours getting petitions signed and, once again, celebrated our success at La Paz on a delightful spring evening. I then headed back to Florida, became a social worker, which is still my profession, and married Peter Hughes, a UFW boycott supporter (of course). My years with the United Farm Workers were the most exciting and rewarding of my life. Many lifelong bonds were formed, and to this day, I am lucky to still have friendships with Robbie Jaffe, Patty Teufel, Dick Wiesenhahn, Susie Gagan, Richard Gagan, John Looney, and Rick Nixon.