

Elizabeth Hernandez 1971–1977

It was in the spring of 1962 that I first met Cesar E. Chavez. I was 12 years and in the sixth grade. I was a kid and he was an adult so he didn't make an impression on me. My parents, on the other hand, were farmworkers with limited education who were quite taken by the young, energetic, charming, and soft-spoken man who was trying to organize them into the National Farm Workers Association. The organizers along with Cesar would meet in people's homes to discuss how the lives of the farmworkers could be improved if all would band together in unity.

Throughout the next several years, between 1962 and 1968, my parents would drag my younger sisters and baby brother throughout the San Joaquin Valley. If there was a meeting involving a farmworkers' dispute, my parents were certainly there. There was the march to Sacramento in 1966, countless picket lines at ranches, and other events that have slipped my mind.

I wasn't completely involved during those years because the issues were beyond my comprehension. This would change in 1971, when I volunteered to help out during my summer vacation from college. I was 21 years old and ready to take up Cesar's offer and become an organizer. I didn't plan to spend more than six weeks with the UFW, but I ended up spending almost six and a half years!

My first assignment was in membership. My job was to travel throughout California, visiting many small cities where we would photograph and print membership cards for the farmworkers. Along with Freddy Chavez, Roger Terronez, and Janis (can't recall last name), I spent many months on the road doing this assignment. We stayed in people's homes because we didn't have funds to cover the cost of renting a motel room. At times we would sleep in the UFW's field office or at relatives' homes. We even stayed in some church basements. Sometimes we slept in the Ford van that carried all the equipment along with our suitcases. Our food was provided by whoever offered to put us up for the night.

It was a learning experience that opened my eyes to the injustices throughout California's agriculture farms. The homes of the landowners versus those of the workers, the beautiful cars and trucks of the rich versus the broken-down cars of the workers, the hunger that lingered in the children's faces, and the never-ending struggle of working from dawn to dusk only to end up owing that money to stay ahead.

When summer ended in 1971 and the membership campaign came to an end, I decided to stay with the UFW for the rest of the year. The struggle had begun back in the 1960s, and I wanted to be a part of it in the 1970s. Throughout the next few years I picketed, boycotted, organized, helped in political campaigns, lectured in junior colleges and universities, and worked in UFW-supported union offices throughout California and Arizona.

I lived in Delano, Sacramento, La Paz, San Luis (Arizona), Brawley, Indio, Los Angeles, Northridge, San Fernando, and countless other cities while I was with the UFW. I spent time in jails because of UFW activities—two weeks in a road camp in Fresno County in 1973, and in Los Angeles and Yuma, Arizona. My favorite place was in the Fresno County road camp where my two younger sisters, Emma and Gloria, were also jailed. This incident occurred in the summer of 1973 when more than 700 farmworkers were incarcerated throughout Fresno. Some of the men were housed in the Fresno Fairgrounds and the county jail. The women were taken to the road camp because the county jail was overcrowded. I remember my mom, Elisa V. Hernandez, coming to visit us and praising us for standing up and fighting against the injustice she and my father had gone through in their lives. This was a wonderful experience because the oldest woman in the road camp was 80 years old and the youngest woman had just turned 18. Of course, all the charges were dropped and the county had a huge bill to pay for all the jailed farmworkers.

The worst place that I picketed was in the Coachella Valley in the early spring of 1973. The grape harvest had begun, and the UFW picketers were once again in the fields asking the workers to leave their jobs and to honor the UFW boycott against grapes. The grape growers had hired goons (Teamsters) to keep us off the fields. Every morning the Teamsters would stand side by side. By the way, there were also police officers just waiting to haul either us or the goons off to jail if any problem occurred. The goons would taunt, harass, curse, and yell obscenities at the women and just make our day miserable. We didn't give up because we gave it right back to them. This was a long, hot summer where temperatures were often over 100 degrees.

My memories with the UFW are numerous and some of them are starting to fade as I grow older. I have tried to instill some of my experiences and knowledge to my daughter. I want my past years with the UFW to count, because I made a contribution to help make the UFW what it is today. It wasn't only Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, politicians, and other "big names," but all the farmworkers, college students, community members, and numerous supporters throughout the United States who helped the UFW. I am glad that I had the opportunity to participate in those earlier years of the farmworker movement.

In 1976 I left the UFW to fulfill a promise to my parents that I would continue my college education. In 1980 I graduated from Fresno State and obtained my teaching credential in elementary education. For the last 24 years, I have been teaching and fulfilling my promise to myself, my parents, and to Cesar Chavez to continue to educate the minds of those who need to know the history of the farmworker movement.

I teach first grade at John C. Martinez Elementary in the Parlier Unified School District—the same school district where once upon a time I was a student in sixth grade meeting Cesar Chavez for the first time in 1962.