

Jerry Ryan 1971–1977

I consider my life to have been *near* totally and positively impacted by Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers. I *know* that the lives of my three children have been *totally and positively* impacted by Cesar and the UFW.

I worked for a total of seven years with the UFW, earning, as Cesar and all other staff did at the time, the infamous “striker’s wages” (room and board, plus five bucks a week). Best pay I ever received!

I met my wife, Guillermina Arellano, a farmworker and UFW member who picked grapes while I was organizing in the Coachella Valley grape fields, in 1976. At that point I had worked for the UFW for approximately five years between the grape, lettuce, and Gallo wine boycotts in Denver, then in San Diego (Proposition 14), and finally in Coachella, organizing grape workers under the ALRA-supervised (supposedly) representational elections, pitting the UFW against the growers and Teamsters.

Within two years, I ended my career working for the UFW when Guillermina and I were married in Coachella. Soon thereafter we began our family: Johnny, Mariana, and Kevin (ages 23, 20, and 14, respectively, in 2003) who were the byproducts of that great union within a union. Hence, the statement that the lives of my three kids were *totally* impacted by Brother Cesar Chavez.

To this date, I follow and support the UFW whenever possible. I recently had the privilege to speak at the official unveiling of the first-ever Cesar E. Chavez United States postal stamp in Los Angeles, honoring Cesar’s historic efforts. (I am fortunate to currently represent letter carriers as the president of the National Association of Letter Carriers, Branch 411, San Bernardino, California, and was asked by our national president, Mr. William H. Young, to represent the nation’s 300,000 letter carriers who provide America with vital communication on a daily basis. The fact that such communication now comes in the form of a United States postal stamp honoring Cesar Chavez is truly fitting and appropriate.)

I remember my first picket line in 1971 in Boulder, Colorado. We were picketing a large liquor store that was selling scab wines. (It was Italian Swiss Colony at the time—just another run-of-the-mill “poor” grape grower trying to squeeze by. Did I forget to mention that Italian Swiss Colony was owned by the Heublein Corporation, which in turn owned Kentucky Fried Chicken and a few other multibillion-dollar entities!)

At any rate, I was a scrawny, 19-year-old college student on vacation who decided to spend a few weeks trying to help out *La Causa* (not that I really even knew what *La Causa* was at the time). I planned to go back to college at Kansas State College (KSC) in the fall. I hoped to major in either sociology or journalism.

Being new to the picket-line scenario, I was pretty much in awe of the entire situation. Next thing I knew, a goon from the store came out and began to insert his size 12 cowboy boot directly—and violently—into the groin of our picket captain and boycott coordinator, Chester Ruiz. As I tried to pull Chester out of the way, another goon, this one about twice the size of both Chester and me combined, jumped on top of me from behind. Sprawled out on the cement pavement in the middle of the street in downtown Boulder, with the goon still on top of me, the local sheriff's department was gracious enough to assist me out of the pile, into the paddy wagon, and off to jail!

Funny thing was, the oversized goon was never even questioned, let alone jailed!

It was at that exact moment that this white kid from Kansas City understood something was extremely wrong with this equation, causing me to never to return to my collegiate studies at KSC.

Most of my time with the UFW was in Denver on the boycott. We were routinely arrested, harassed, beaten up, and otherwise appreciated by those who saw the wisdom and necessity of ensuring that America's agricultural workers had no voice on the job, lived in dire poverty, and were exposed to toxic chemicals at work on a routine basis. At the same, they honored the American principles that "Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush, and Bush," stood for, and in fact, still stand for!

An example of such was on the Fourth of July in 1974. We had a picket line with about 200 supporters protesting the sale of Gallo wines in Denver when the police arrived and called my name out over the bullhorn to set the parameters of the nonviolent, totally legal picket line. (By then I was the Colorado coordinator for the UFW.)

As soon as I left the picket line and went over to meet with the police they slapped handcuffs on me, threw me in the cop car, and took me to jail. There had been absolutely no incidents at the picket line, no restraining orders, and the other 200 picketers were allowed to continue picketing!

As luck would have it, when I went to court to challenge the arrest, I ended up in front of an extremely well-known, racist, anti-union judge in Denver. I happened to be wearing a UFW "Boycott Gallo" union pin. Judge Robert Commins ordered me to take the union button off while in court. When I declined to do so, he informed me that he would hold me in "contempt of court" if I didn't take off the union button and that, as such, not only would I be jailed but there would be no bail for contempt of court charges. This would mean I would stay in jail until I agreed to keep the button off while in court.

Of course I refused.

Judge Commins slammed his gavel down, growled at the uniformed officer to handcuff me and take me from the courtroom to jail, where I would stay until, as he so diplomatically

promised, either hell froze over or I would agree to come back to court not wearing my union button.

I didn't know much about hell freezing over, but I damn well knew the union button was staying.

Back to jail it was! While being escorted out of court in handcuffs because I had the nerve to wear a *union button*, I graciously thanked the good judge for his wisdom, professionalism, and impartiality in the ever-so-complex issue of whether or not picketers had first amendment rights.

Fortunately, the union attorney was able to petition a superior judge to review the case, at which time he found the whole case unbelievably unconstitutional and in conflict with freedom of speech that he chastised Judge Commins and immediately ordered my release from jail. All of which made for great "boycott" fodder for the local media, wherein the nature of the arrest made front-page news in both newspapers and was the lead story for every television and radio station in town. (It wasn't until 20 years later that I was informed that due to dear Judge Commins, I was chronicled into the *Who's Who* at the official Denver Public Library, under the caption "*United Farm Worker leader...jailed for contempt of court when he refused to take off Boycott Gallo Wine union button.*" Once again, public thanks to Judge Commins!)

When I *did* go back to court on the initial charges I, along with every other supporter in the packed courtroom, wore the same "Boycott Gallo" union buttons. And this time, none of us, including a rabbi, a priest, several nuns, a state legislator, and a bunch of ordinary people, were ordered to take off the union buttons.

The initial charge relating to my Fourth of July arrest was dropped, as was every other charge in the 20-plus different times that I was jailed, along with UFW staff members Mike Wilzoch, Klaus Schlosser (huelgista turned boycotter), Jesus Valderrama (rest in peace, *compañero*), Arlene Irlando, and countless others, while engaging in lawful, first-amendment-protected assembly on the boycott in Denver. One of Arlene's children, Andres Irlando, is currently the director for the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation. Back then Andres was a small, energetic kid who we thought was just trying to wreak as much havoc as possible upon our weekly staff meetings. Now we know he was merely honing his organizing skills!

It was the constant barrage of unwarranted arrests and the big Gallo wine PR money that led me to begin a 15-day water-only fast while camped out 24 hours a day in a small, beat-up travel trailer that we parked in front of a large Gallo wine outlet in Denver in the middle of the worst snow storm you could imagine in the winter of 1975.

Let me say this from the outset, I like to eat. A lot! I was probably *the* worst candidate imaginable to go on a fast.

But, as the saying goes, desperate times call for desperate measures, and before I knew it—and 15 days later—I was 20 pounds lighter. (I could sure use some of that conviction now!) The first food I consumed after the fast was Holy Communion served by Bishop Richard Haniffen of the Denver Archdiocese at the rectory of nearby Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. And, most important, the fast garnered enough support and publicity that we literally shut down the large liquor outlet that had not only refused to honor the boycott but actually had the gall to take out full-page ads in the Denver newspapers blasting the UFW's boycott of Gallo wines. In those days, it wasn't a wise decision, to say the least, to side with racist, California grape growers in Denver's very Chicano north side of town, where Corky Gonzalez and the Crusade for Justice ruled. I mean that store actually went out of business! Period!

The priest at Guadalupe, where I broke the fast, was Padre Jose Lara, a living legend, known throughout Colorado as *Padre Huelga* because he was such a strong UFW supporter and for years wore a beautiful, bright red robe with the famous UFW *aguila negra* at Sunday's *misa de mariachi* (mariachi mass). The church also served as somewhat of a "sanctuary" for Denver boycotters, where we converged on a daily basis during tough times for moral support. Sadly enough, these experiences paled in comparison to the harsh treatment and self-sacrifice that I witnessed firsthand by countless other union organizers and farmworkers themselves.

There was Crispin Lepe. *Crispin era un palmero en la valley de Coachella*. Crispin was a date worker at a ranch the UFW was organizing in Coachella around 1976. I was assigned to help out in the effort to gain a secret ballot election by obtaining union signature cards signed by a majority of the workers.

Date workers, by necessity, have to be very strong and nearly fearless. At various times of the year they climb tall date trees using wretched old wooden ladders that have been physically tied to the trees for years. The workers then use small, portable ladders to reach the permanently attached, higher ladders. The combination of sun, wind, and rain leaves many of the attached, wooden ladders in very poor condition, exposing the workers to the obvious danger of falling to the ground.

During certain times of the year they are forced to use large knives (almost machete-like in size) to perform various aspects of work while hanging on the tree with a ropelike belt. Not for the weak of heart, let me tell you. (I knew another *palmero* named Daniel who, like Crispin, was big and strong. He was employed in nearby Palm Springs, winter haven to the rich and wealthy. One day, grabbing some early morning coffee, I saw Daniel at Canedo's Restaurant, a small, family-run restaurant just down the street from the UFW union hall on 6th Street in Coachella. Daniel was in a wheelchair with bandages and casts over the majority of his body. He had fallen from a date tree while working in downtown Palm Springs, where cement sidewalks are the only thing below the tall trees lining the scenic tourist town.)

Back to Crispin and the organizing drive. This large, strong, family man, who lived in a company house in the middle of date groves, told me that while he was strongly pro-union, his wife was fearful of the consequences if the grower found out that he signed a union card. I assured Crispin not to fear. I told him that for the first time in the history of California there was a state law to protect him from reprisal. Signing up Crispin was critical to the drive for unionization in his company because he was well known and respected by all of his coworkers and even supervisors because he was such a strong, hard worker.

After Crispin had a 30-minute heart-to-heart in his little shack with his wife, he emerged with the biggest grin on his face, proudly waving the signed union card in his clenched fist.

A few days later, I returned to Crispin's house, which was encircled by hundreds and hundreds of tall date trees, for a follow-up house meeting (also known as an "organizing" meeting in the worker's house that Cesar and the UFW so efficiently utilized, minimizing the possibility of detection by the *mayordomo*—the company foreman.) Crispin was slumped over on his porch in tears. He didn't have to say a word. I knew. The moment I saw him I knew that he'd been fired, and therefore, evicted from his company house.

I'll never to this day forget the image of Crispin and his family with all of their earthly possessions packed into and on top of their old jalopy as they headed out, destination unknown.

At that time Eliseo Medina was the Coachella Valley's UFW coordinator, having been preceded by Ruth Shy. Eventually, I had the honor to meet and briefly work with brother Arturo Rodriguez, who succeeded Cesar Chavez as president of the UFW. And for a time I bunked in Mecca Vineyards with Father Joe Tobin, a Catholic priest who worked for years with the UFW. Bobby and Jan De La Cruz, along with their beautiful, small baby, also lived there with us, as did other staff members. (Bobby's mother had been one of the very first Chavistas.)

It was during that time that I first met my wife. She worked at the Freedman Table Grape Company. Freedman was not only the largest table grape grower in the country, but at that point it was the only table grape grower that honored the wishes of the workers and didn't sign a sweetheart contract with the Teamsters.

All of her family worked in the fields when they came to the U.S. from Mexico (she was just 13 years old at the time) and were very pro-UFW, involved in the strikes and overall union activities. In prior decades her father, Don Epigmenio Arellano worked in the U.S. under the exploitative *bracero* program. To this day, several of her family members still work the fields.

I soon fell in love with Guillermina, with hopes of proposing to her but I wasn't sure just yet of what her response would be. I also realized that I would need to be able to provide for her and, hopefully, a family, so seven years after I joined *La Causa* for a summer

vacation, I left the UFW. (To be perfectly honest, by that point I was already pretty burned out and figured I really hadn't added much to the UFW efforts after I left the boycott in Denver.) Still not certain of Guillermina's feelings towards me, my first move was to get closer to her, and the best way I could think of doing that was to go to work in those very same grape fields.

So, while working for the *Indio Daily News* as a part-time sports writer for local events, I spent two harvests picking grapes at the Freedman ranch. Talk about irony. I would start before sunrise and into the early afternoon I would pick grapes in the hot, dusty grape fields and then dash for a quick shower, throw on some "presentable" clothes, and go out to the rich, green golf courses in nearby La Quinta, Indio, Palm Desert, and Palm Springs, to cover the various elite golf tournaments such as the Dinah Shore/Colgate Invitational Tournament for the upstart Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). I also covered local college and high-school sporting events. I would occasionally and distantly recognize many of these fine coaches and dignitaries as anti-UFW people. At times this ex-UFW organizer and current grape picker by day spent the afternoons being chauffeured around the elaborate golf courses in nifty little golf carts by the resident golf pro or club public relations director. Then, of course, there were the occasional clubhouse luncheons where we would be treated to lavish feeding spreads the country clubs would sponsor before or after interviews of various distinguished golfers such as Jan Stephenson. Somehow, I'm pretty sure that I would not have received red carpet treatment if they knew of my UFW ties or could have seen me hours earlier working in grapes fields that, in some cases, were literally adjacent to the luxurious, rolling golf courses, abundant in breathtaking, artificial waterfalls and lined with manicured shrubs.

Then, to save a few bucks for what I hoped to be our eventual wedding, I moved into the Freedman farm labor camp, located right in the midst of miles and miles of grape vineyards. While the camp was one of the best labor camps (relatively speaking, of course) actually located on growers' property, in reality it was the pits. Small, folding, flimsy cots to sleep on. Dirty showers and toilet facilities. Dim lights hanging from ceilings. Hot as hell, even at midnight.

But the workers were great. I knew nearly all of them from my UFW days. This was a camp all of the old-time, strike-scarred, blacklisted Chavistas gravitated to when the other growers wouldn't hire them because of their decidedly pro-UFW stance. To say that these humble workers looked kindly upon someone going to bat for them would have been the understatement of the year. They even adopted me as their token farmworker.

I saved money, proposed, she accepted, and we got married!

Married, without a college degree or special skills (save union hell-raising and writing part-time sports for a small newspaper at relatively low wages), I was in dire need of finding a good job to raise a family on. I applied and was hired by the United States Postal Service. My dad had been a letter carrier for 35 years and USPS paid decent wages and benefits

after years of valiant union struggles for such by the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) union.

After carrying mail for 15 years, I was elected as full-time president for the NALC, Branch 411, AFL-CIO—to which I've proudly served for the last 10 years.

Now, more than 30 years after my first contact with farmworkers, 30 years after a summer lark, I look back and cherish my humble association with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers of America, having received much more than I ever gave.

In fact, it's for that very reason I recently informed brother Arturo Rodriguez that after I retire from the NALC and the USPS, and when the kids are through college, my intention is to return to work for the UFW. And, if I get arrested, I'll be wearing my UFW button to court. Are you listening, Judge Commins?

That would culminate a full circle for this one-time scrawny college kid from Kansas City on a summer vacation!