

Andy Coe 1972–1974, 1976

I joined the United Farm Workers as a volunteer in February of 1972, working in the Pomona/ Claremont area, east of Los Angeles. I had just moved out to Claremont from the East Coast as a 24-year-old conscientious objector, two years out of college. My parents had moved to Claremont the previous summer. I had heard about the United Farm Workers and Cesar Chavez during my college years. One of my college roommates, Larry Francis, was from L.A., and he kept talking about the work of Chris Hartmire and the migrant ministry. One of the first things I did when I got to California was to drive up to Delano to visit Larry and Gordon and Felicia Williamson, who were working at the Huelga School.

Within a month after I started as a volunteer I joined the union full time, attracted I am sure by the offer of room and board and \$5 a week! When I joined, the target was Ralph's and their non-union Gallo and Franzia wine. I worked for the union for two years, all of it in the L.A. area, first on the Ralph's campaign, then as coordinator of West L.A. during Proposition 22, then working for LeRoy Chatfield as second-in command of the L.A. Safeway boycott in 1973 and, finally, as San Fernando Valley coordinator in late 1973 and early 1974. At this point I burned out, as so many of us did, and left. I came back to work for the UFW in the Bay Area during the 1976 Proposition 14 campaign, coordinating the campaign in Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Sunnyvale, and on the Stanford campus.

My UFW experience was a powerful one. I thoroughly enjoyed the work, the cause, and the people that I met and worked with. I always say that I earned a graduate degree in community organizing from the UFW. I learned things about people and getting things done that I still utilize today. While the work was all-consuming, I also remember the respites we sought from our work—playing hours of basketball on Sunday nights over at the USC outdoor courts, working off the frustrations and energy of a week of boycotting or campaigning. Or dashing out to Santa Monica as the sun was setting for some body surfing at the end of a long, hot summer's day in front of Safeway. Or cooking for 20 to 25 people jammed into Hobart House in L.A. and trying to satisfy their hunger with the only thing I could cook for large groups—grilled cheese sandwiches!

There are many ironies of my work with the UFW. One is that I spent much of the fall of 1976 organizing Stanford students to work and vote against Proposition 14. Today I am director of community relations for the university, and, among other things, conduct UFW-style house meeting campaigns to build ties between the university and the surrounding community. Another is that I influenced my father to finish out his professional career by working for the NFWM and the union in L.A. in the early 1980s. His involvement against the Vietnam War and for the civil rights movement as a Congregational minister influenced my life growing up and my decision to join the UFW. I always got a kick out of the fact that he finished his work life working for the farmworkers, inspired in part by my experience.

The boycott experience was all-consuming, as we all know. The experience was a once-in-a-lifetime one that can never be replaced, nor would I want to try to duplicate it. When I left the union in 1974, I was burned out emotionally and had nothing more to give. Life on the outside, however, seemed dull and boring. I kept feeling that I had to go back. But at the same time I knew I could not go back—that I would not be able to commit myself, body and soul, to the union and to the work—that there would be a personal price to pay that was too high. I finally did come back in the fall of 1976 to work on the Proposition 14 campaign. I came back on my terms with my eyes open, knowing what I was getting into and knowing that it would be over on Election Day. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience (despite getting clobbered at the polls!) and left ready to move on with my life.