

Kate Colwell 1973–1976

Introduction

My life is divided into “pre-UFW,” or childhood; “post-UFW,” or ordinary life; and 1973 through 1976—those three-and-a-half pivotal coming-of-age years that I spent living on \$5 a week. Looking back on the past 30 years, I have never found a perfect place to work or a perfect place to live, and the UFW was no exception. I do remember fatigue, stress, and bickering, but I also remember wonderful friendships and the intense high of a passionate campaign for social justice. Fortunately for me, I left before the strife that soured so many people.

When I try to remember dates and places sometimes I’m amazed how many memories I have of places in which I lived or worked for only a few months. Because we all lived, worked, and socialized within the union, those years probably count as triple time. Two months of UFW time has the significance of at least six ordinary months.

Early Memories

My first memory of Cesar was Easter Sunday in 1966. I was raised in a large Catholic family by social activist parents. With my family I was on picket lines for civil rights, then on picket lines for UFWOC, and later, anti-war rallies. In 1965 I had been on a few supermarket picket lines in San Francisco to urge customers to boycott wines (or was it grapes?). Even today when I walk in downtown San Francisco, I remember picketing some fancy wine distributor on First St. to get him to stop carrying Perelli Minetti. Joining the march to Sacramento was a natural.

My godmother and I took a Greyhound bus to somewhere near Merced to march on Good Friday. I was not yet 12. I remember going to mass, and I remember being excited to actually see the farmworkers we were trying to help. My godmother hadn’t brought enough cash and we weren’t well prepared to stay, so she borrowed some money and we took the bus back to SF that night. On Sunday my entire family loaded into our VW bus and drove to Sacramento. I caught my first glimpse of Cesar as he railed against Pat Brown, who had chosen to go away to spend Easter with his family rather than recognizing the hundreds of people who had walked 300 miles to bring him their message. That disappointment was washed away by the tremendous news that Schenley had signed! There was hope for a victory for farmworkers. How far away that time seems now.

Los Angeles/San Fernando Boycott

I joined the UFW on April 3, 1973. I was not quite 20 and supposedly came on a three-month work-study from Antioch College. I had asked to teach at the Huelga School in Delano and I got assigned to the boycott. In his welcoming letter Andy Coe reassured me that one always did the boycott first and then was asked to go elsewhere. In the next 14

months I lived first in the big Hobart house off Western, later in a house in Northridge owned by Christine Jorgensen, and later in a new house we rented in San Fernando. Safeway was our main target, and I spent a good deal of my life in front of the Barrington Safeway in Santa Monica and at Safeways in Woodland Hills and Canoga Park. A few of many memories:

We lived on donated food and food stamps. A few of us would go through all the hassle of applying for food stamps and lying that we all cooked and ate separately and stored our food on separate shelves in the refrigerator. I think they actually did house inspections sometimes. Then we would have one person's food stamps for five people in the household, so we basically shopped only for eggs, tortillas, milk, rice, and beans, and then we added whatever weird food came in donated cans and bags. Years after the UFW I'd tell people I knew only how to cook for one (myself), 10 (my family of origin), or 25 to 100 (UFW)—anything in between stymied me.

The big house would have about 22 people, about half of whom were farmworker families and half non-farmworker volunteers. Some of us were bilingual, albeit not bicultural, but I'd say the majority were basically monolingual in either English or Spanish. This made for fun and tension. Unmarried couples and looser lifestyles must have been very hard on the *huelgistas*. Domestic violence and different roles for women in the farmworker families were certainly hard on the feminist volunteers.

My Safeway memories are of impassioned pleading, boredom, hunger, and fatigue. Sometimes it was just too much to stand there hour after hour handing out leaflets and begging people not to go in the store. It was hard not to get angry and hassle people. I think of those days every time I see a leafleter in a supermarket parking lot. I try to make myself stop and listen to their issue. My Safeway memories also include being hungry and the daily decisions about whether to spend precious cash on food. Sometimes there was no place nearby to buy food, but in Canoga Park there was a Winchell's in the same parking lot. I think coffee was a dime and doughnuts were 15 cents, and sometime during each morning I would usually break down and spend my quarter.

One of the highlights of the boycott was when we were allowed out of the city to go where there were real strikers. Coachella went out on strike soon after I moved to L.A., and we were all thrilled to be allowed to spend a few days on the picket lines. I think we slept in a park. I remember seeing (Father) Gene Boyle there about 5 a.m. one morning—he was a familiar face from my San Francisco adolescence.

Andy Coe, Ellen Eggers, Sandy Cate, Kathy Gilligan, Armando Cobos, Tony Estrada, Irma Escamilla, Liz Hernandez, Pat Morales, Dave Stump. Where are you all now? I hope life has treated you well. Later, we were joined by Bobby de la Cruz, whose daughter I just met at a demonstration last year; Terry, whose name I just saw on the listserv; dozens and dozens of volunteers went through L.A. that year. Jim Drake came in 1974 as I was leaving. Even Mario Savio joined for a week or two.

For a while I was working in the Olympic Street office and commuting daily 100 miles to and from Northridge. It was there that I got to know Chris Hartmire and the folks at the NFWM. I was in the office when Elizer and Manual Vasquez joined the boycott. I think that's when we had the Harvard House, not too far from Hobart, which was primarily occupied by *huelgistas lechgueros*. In that house was M. Matamoros and Winnie Arballo, a gorgeous Yaqui man who had pledged to the Virgen of Guadalupe not to cut his hair till we won the Huelga. He taught me to roll tortillas using a 7-Up bottle.

Farmworkers taught me all kinds of cooking that I'd never learned at home: how to roast and peel chiles, how not to get burned mixing salsas, how to make perfect beans. Food seems to be a recurrent theme here, but I was a young vegetarian and had a very hard time getting enough protein in large meat-eating households with inadequate funds. I do remember the San Fernando house as gloriously big and open. I remember a very young guy named Nick, who had no gardening experience, but with some of the farmworkers planted a gorgeous vegetable garden out back.

Food and Other Donations (Or How to Cook for Two Dozen)

Who can forget the donations? Money was good, reams of paper kept the mimeo machines going, but at least for boycotters, food and clothing were the big donations.

To this day, I halt before I put that unneeded can of cranberry sauce in a food drive bag. I'll never forget the disappointment of opening bags of donated food from some kind church folks and finding them full of unusable stuff. In L.A. we had food stamps for about one-fifth of the household, and that bought milk, eggs, produce, and tortillas. Until I moved to L.A. I had never seen "supersized" supermarkets, and I remember walking through Ralph's with Kathy Gilligan, filling up on the essential staples and those perishables that she was able to buy with food stamps. Somehow we also got USDA surplus: blocks of butter and processed cheese, peanut butter in gallon cans, dried milk, and eggs. The rest of the food was basically donations.

We cooked in crews: someone who knew how to cook with a couple helpers to prep cook, set the table, and clean up. I knew how to cook for a family of 10, so doubling it was easy, but the ingredients provided the challenge. How many kinds of canned beans could you combine into a bean salad? What kind of a casserole could you make with six different kinds of canned vegetables and soups plus white rice? How often could we serve rice and beans? How could anyone satisfy 21 people in Hobart House when half ate an Anglo diet and half ate a Mexican diet? And then there were us pesky vegetarians who insisted on some non-meat protein in every dinner. Cooking epitomized the crosscultural tensions and the strain of poverty in the boycott.

The most fun was cooking for rallies when farmworkers came to L.A. I remember being with Kathy and Avelina C. and dozens of others (women) and cooking for hundreds.

Breaking hundreds of eggs the night before and storing them in big bowls in refrigerators in a church basement to be mixed with dried eggs in the morning to make scrambled egg burritos by the hundreds; some with chorizo and a few boring egg burritos for the veggies. We grated 20-pound sacks of potatoes to make home fries and cut onions and chiles by the dozens to make salsa. Hard work, but pleasurable: to make good food that satisfied so many.

Last but not least, I have to mention clothes donations. I remember presorting the bags when they first came into the house to throw out the moldy or unwearable stained and worn-out items before everyone went through them. I came to the union with a decent wardrobe, so clothes weren't so essential the first year or two. I sewed a few blouses by hand, but donated clothes provided variety from boredom and an escape clause from privation. I found a 1940s Empire-waist forest green rayon dress in a donation bag in 1973. I used it as a nightgown for 20 years until weight gain made that impossible. There were wild hippie skirts and worn jeans. I don't remember ever finding shoes in the donation bag, but then again I didn't wear shoes in those days so an annual pair of *guaraches* got me through. I have no memory of getting money from my family, but I suspect that birthday and Christmas gifts must have helped with the unmentionables not available in the donation bags.

Gas Prices

Nowadays when I go to the pump and fill up, I charge \$30 on my credit card. I'm pained because it's a reminder of how our country is trading blood for oil and of multinational scandals, but not as pained as I was the first time I had to turn over \$5 to fill up my tank.

When I joined the union in early 1973, gas was 26 cents a gallon. A year later, things had fallen apart and gas had doubled to more than 50 cents a gallon and it was hard to find. Gas stations were closed on Sundays. People hoarded gasoline, and rationing of deliveries to service stations meant there were sometimes lines an hour long to get gas, and always the threat of having the station run out before you got to the front of the line. There was a rationing system for a while that let you buy gas on certain days, depending on whether the last digit of your license plate was odd or even. I think these were countywide systems, because I also remember driving out of L.A. and having to figure out what rules they were on.

Before the gas shortages we had put a dollar of gas in the tank each time and then used our "cash receipt" to get reimbursed before we needed the next dollar's worth. After the shortages began, we had to fill the tank each time, never knowing when we would next have the chance. On a grand stipend of \$5 a week, having \$5 in cash available to fill up was very hard to do.

One time I remember driving in a caravan of union Valiants to transport a group of farmworkers from McFarland. Gas was scarce and like us, trucks were traveling in caravans

to help each other out. We left L.A. in the evening and got to McFarland late. There wasn't really any place for us to stay, but we were young and energetic, so we did the round trip that night. I remember driving a car that didn't have much gas and as we came over the Grapevine we were coasting down each hill to save gas. It was after midnight and in L.A. all the stations closed early. As we approached Gorman, I ran out of gas and was forced to leave the freeway and coast into a station, expecting to spend the night there. What a relief to find an open station and buy enough gas to get home!

A Calling

In March of 1973 when I left Antioch College on what was to be a three-month work-study rotation with the United Farm Workers Association boycott in Los Angeles, I had requested work in Delano at the Huelga School as part of my focus on elementary education, but was told entrée into such places was earned on the boycott.

After an adventurous 14 months in L.A., I left the boycott, showed up in Delano, and spent the summer as a volunteer at the Huelga School. I think I hadn't actually gotten permission to go there so I wasn't officially on staff. Steve Mason (now deceased) ran the school and lived next door with his daughter Angie. After a summer of sleeping on the floor of a classroom of the Huelga School, I went to work at a pizza parlor on the edge of town in order to support my daytime activities with the union.

Janet Alexander, one of the teachers at the Huelga School, lived with Dan Murphy, the doctor at the clinic. One day she was complaining how much sleep they lost because volunteer nurses who stayed in the clinic overnight often didn't speak enough Spanish to handle dawn calls from the workers before they left for the fields. Dan was often awakened only to discover the call was to make an appointment or some similar non-emergency. I volunteered that I certainly knew nothing about nursing, but maybe I could stay overnight with a nurse and translate.

In the beginning I had to learn to take a pulse and blood pressure and read a thermometer. There weren't enough nurses on staff to let any volunteers pair up. I was on my own with instructions to get the complaint, take vital signs, and call the doctor. A few weeks into this experience, I got my calling and never looked back. This rapidly escalated into a full-time job at the clinics. Esther talked to Ben Maddock in the field office so they finally let me back on staff (despite having been AWOL from the boycott).

In 1973, farmworkers in Delano were either not covered by health insurance or on strike from employers who had previously had contracts with the union that included health benefits. The Delano Community Hospital would not provide labor and delivery services to anyone who could not put down a \$300 deposit for delivery. No one could afford that, and so women would show up at the emergency room or call an ambulance in labor. They'd be delivered by ER doctors and discharged home with their baby a few hours later. In order to improve this terrible and unsafe situation, the clinic staff put a couple beds in

the back of the clinic, obtained forceps, de lee traps and other OB equipment, made up sterile OB packs, and told women who got their prenatal care at the clinic that they could deliver in the clinic if they wished. We would watch them for 12 to 24 hours and then follow up with daily home visits for three days until we felt sure they were stable.

Soon after I started volunteering overnight at the clinic, I was there when a baby was born. I was 21 years old, I had never seen a baby born, even on film, and it was certainly one of the momentous occasions of my life! It was a weekend day and I had no way to get the two miles from Forty Acres to Delano. I remember walking home alone along the highway in the scorching sun, composing poetry and knowing that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life! Working for social justice was a given, an inheritance from my parents. Health care was a call, an abrupt turn on life's path, and I could not have been happier.

For the next 16 months I worked in the clinic in ever-expanding roles until I was asked to leave and take over as director of the Sanger clinic. Those months in Delano I learned medicine and OB from large medical texts, reading with a medical dictionary open next to me to look up word after word. I learned from Dan Murphy, a wonderful doctor who was way overextended! I learned from my friend Carolyn and all the nurses who worked in the clinic. Whatever education or background one came in with, we were stretched in the clinic to expand our roles several times.

Attending births was a privilege and a pleasure, but what I also truly loved was the home visiting. I've realized since that this was the perfect task for an introvert. Since I basically need a lot of time alone, this time in the car alone was manna from heaven for me. It was very hard for me to live with so many people and spend all day "on," talking to people non-stop in the clinic. I spent hours alone in a car driving to labor camps and homes throughout the county and beyond. I have many memories of gorgeous sunrises and sunsets over the vineyards, and of red-gold grape leaves shimmering in the sun. It is still one of my favorite sights.

Because we sent women and babies home about 12 hours after birth, I would go visit them daily for three days. I had spent hours with the woman in labor and bonded with a beautiful baby and now I could go spend time with them checking for jaundice and infection, but actually enjoying peaceful time with a happy twosome. Despite some sick babies in the labor camps, and other tragedies, those are basically great memories.

Delano Clinic

Someday I will write of a wonderful part of my life at the Rodrigo Terronez Memorial Clinic, but a chance conversation reminded me of the heroin overdoses. As I've mentioned, clinic staff slept in the clinic to deal with the phone and whoever needed help in the night. We were always alone, although I think there was a watchman at Forty Acres and, at some point, the Agbayani Village was occupied. We slept on top of a bed that we could put a patient in if necessary, in the back of the clinic near double doors at the top of

a ramp. We usually heard people coming because a car would pull off Garces Highway, drive around to the bottom of the ramp, and people would walk up and ring the bell. There is a certain sound that I still can feel viscerally that signaled the arrival of a heroin OD.

These were not farmworkers, but young people from around Delano who knew we wouldn't call the cops. There were always a bunch of them in a car; I remember only men. Those cars were always driven fast, arriving in a noisy way that would startle me awake in fear. There would be doors opening, urgent conversation and noise, and the sound of a body being dragged up the ramp. Usually they would bang on the door and ring the bell, but I remember times when they'd dump the body, ring the bell, and run. It probably only happened to me six or eight times in 16 months, but it got to the point that I'd look out the window, know what was coming, and walk first into our emergency room to draw up a syringe of Narcan, a narcotic antagonist.

I'd open the door in fear, often giving the first injection as the body lay on the ramp, trying to get the person's friends to help carry them into our ER. I think the first time it happened I had to call Dan at home and he told me by phone how much Narcan to draw up and to give it intramuscularly if I couldn't find a vein. Later it was a routine: syringe, Narcan, tourniquet, and look for a vein. I don't know which was scarier: the fear they wouldn't wake up or the chaos when they did wake up, fighting and furious to have lost their high! This I experienced as a 22-year-old woman alone in the night, before I had any formal health care training. Sometimes I think I dreamed it.

Calexico

Living in a border town was an experience for a 23-year-old urban kid! I might breakfast in the U.S. and have dinner in Mexico—or drive into Mexico for a picnic and a swim.

I spent nine months in Calexico, from February through September of 1976. I was sent down to take over the management of the clinic from a woman (Juanita?) who was departing. Her staff was not happy to see me. Most commuted daily across from Mexicali and were single young women. A *guarache* and jeans-clad feminist from up north didn't fit in very well. I started painting my toenails then as a concession to the femme styles of that place and time.

I used to cross the border a lot. Previously and since then, I have crossed into Mexico once every two or three years, and it's always a big deal. Crossing back and forth a few times a week made it much more prosaic.

There was a border guard who was a friend, maybe an in-law of Manuel's, and we always hoped to get him to make the crossing quicker. Some border guards would be nice to the occupants of an old white Valiant with a million bumper stickers, but for others it was a red flag to detain and harass us.

Once a month I drove into Mexicali and picked up a carload of patients being treated for TB. I drove them up to El Centro to the public health department, where we had an “under the table” arrangement to get our patients treated for free. In subsequent years I’ve wondered at my naïveté in driving in a car full of folks with TB, but I never got infected.

Once I went to pick up someone’s sick mom in Mexicali and I made some minor traffic error. A cop stopped me and demanded a bribe. I literally had no money on me as I almost never had any money. He threatened to take me down to the jail and keep me there until someone from the U.S. would come over and get me out. I didn’t exactly mean to call his bluff, but I had no alternative. Furious, he finally believed I wasn’t going to pay him and he let us go. I took a sick elderly lady to the clinic and back again a few hours later. I was always a little more careful driving in Mexicali. Another time I tried to help get a friend’s mother come across, saying she was a clinic patient, but they figured it out and it didn’t work.

My worst experience was picking up a new *Angla* volunteer from the train station in Mexicali. She had taken Greyhound from the East Coast into Texas and then crossed the border and came west on a train. I don’t know why, but I asked her repeatedly if she had any drugs or contraband before we crossed the border. She said no, but unfortunately they decided to check her luggage. She had about three joints in a matchbox and an avocado pit (forbidden to import), so they tore the car apart for hours while we were detained. We were isolated and strip-searched and I was furious and humiliated. In the end I think they gave her a citation and then let us go, but I never totally forgave her. I think she was a summer volunteer and then moved on.

Insider/Outsider

What was the currency in the union? Status as insider versus outsider comes to mind as one possibility. Someone said the number of years served was the split between those who made the UFW their life and those for whom it was a job. I would say, rather, some of us made the UFW our life for a few years, others for many years; some were involuntarily the children of the union.

How did you get status in the union? One could be a director or leader and involved in policy decisions, and that was certainly more status than being line staff. Being the captain of a Safeway parking lot provided more status than merely being a volunteer. Numbers of years served was a surrogate for insider and did carry status. Being bilingual carried more status than being monolingual.

Geographical proximity to Cesar carried status, so being in Delano was better than being in Florida; being in La Paz was the best of all! Working directly with farmworkers carried status, as did being from a farmworker family. A field office or clinic was closer to the true union than the boycott. Certainly, social or political proximity to Cesar had cache. If Cesar knew your name or smiled at you in recognition, that had status value. Just having my own

bedroom after years of sharing was a huge reward. In a job that was so hard, with so much privation, insider status was tremendously valuable currency.

Leaving

Now in 2004 I have just left a health-care administration position because I realized I was trapped doing something that didn't make me happy and I wasn't very good at it. In my reflections before and after leaving this job, I realized those are the reasons I left the union in the end of 1976.

I had loved doing patient care in Delano; I especially loved the midwifery part of my job. It was a great calling for a young feminist. Like many jobs outside the union, when you're recognized for being good at one job, you often get promoted to doing something totally different. I was scared but honored when Esther Uranday told me the union wanted me to leave Delano and take over as administrator of the Sanger clinic. I was so sad to leave my home in Delano and the community I loved.

After a few months in Sanger they asked me to move to Calexico to take over administration of that clinic. I was way too young (not quite 23), and did not have the people skills to do that job. I had a staff of young Mexicanas who did the clerical work in the clinic and professional Anglos—doctors and nurses. I did not have the skills to mediate the cultural gaps and the tensions among the staff. I remember renting a house for half-a-dozen summer volunteers in 1976....and later forfeiting the security deposit because we didn't know how to get a lawnmower, and the weeds had grown several feet high all around the house. Frank Ortiz tried to guide me, but he was there only briefly. Marshall was in and out of Calexico, but there was no one to mentor me and we were too far away and isolated from a lot of union camaraderie. I was unhappy and probably a little burned-out, and in order to escape I decided I should go to nursing school to become a midwife and return to the work I had loved in Delano. I officially left the union after the convention in September of 1976 but continued to house volunteers in San Francisco and stayed involved through the elections. I fully planned to go back after I finished nursing school, but by 1979, tragically, I think, all the clinics had been closed.