

## Edward (Eddie) Cuellar 1973–1978

My involvement with the farmworker movement stems from the activism of my father, Epigmenio (Eddie) Cuellar, who organized farmworkers in the Imperial Valley in Southern California during the 1930s. He was secretary-treasurer of the Miguel Hidalgo Mutual Society, an organization in Brawley, California, that helped farmworkers. I was born in Brawley in 1944. In 1947 my family moved to the central San Joaquin Valley. There, my father continued to be active, joining Jim Drake and Gil Padilla in organizing migrant rent strikes and other activities. He worked for the CSO and came to know Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez. My father also worked with the American Friends Service Committee on farmworker housing issues. He came to know and work with Richard Chavez, brother of Cesar Chavez, in the Self-Help Enterprise organization that promoted and built low-income housing.

In my later teens I participated in marches and other farmworker organizing activity in Visalia, California. During my college years I became a student volunteer in the farmworker cause.

In college I continued to work in the fields during the summer months. As the events of the 1973 strikes neared Visalia, my family and I joined the strike. (I was then married and had three children: Edward, Caroline, and Monica) I became a picket captain and, with my wife, joined hundreds of farmworkers who were incarcerated for refusing to recognize an illegal injunction prohibiting our picketing activity. We were placed in the Tulare County Jail for one week.

Cesar Chavez called off the strike when Nagi Daifullah and Juan de la Cruz were killed. My family and I volunteered to work on the grape boycott for \$5 a week. In a Volkswagen, we caravanned with other farmworkers to Detroit. There we worked with Richard Chavez and Ben Maddock, an effective organizer and later vice-president of the union. I was assigned to the southern part of Detroit, organizing picket lines with community supporters. During my stay in Detroit I met Artie Rodriguez, future UFW president. He became my *compadre* when my wife and I married in the Catholic Church. Our *comadre* would be Linda Chavez, later Linda Rodriguez. We were also incarcerated in Detroit for not recognizing an injunction prohibiting picketing at the A&P grocery stores. I and others on the Detroit staff were selected as delegates to the first UFW convention in Fresno, California.

When Richard Chavez and Ben Maddock transferred to New York, they requested I become part of their organizing team with Dolores Huerta. We traveled across the northern United States and reached New York City. I was assigned to the Long Island region; we were housed in a Catholic seminary in Huntington, New York. We were assisted by the seminarians, who joined our picket lines. My children attended local schools and received their first communion at the seminary. A bishop who supported the farmworkers conducted the ceremony.

Our boycott efforts were successful, forcing growers and California politicians to consider a labor relations legislative bill that provided secret-ballot elections for farmworkers in California, later known as the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975. I returned to California and was appointed director for the Tulare County region. Fred Ross trained many of us to be effective organizers. I was among the organizers who participated in the first election of the Agricultural Labor Relation Act at the L. Caratan Ranch in Delano. Hundreds of elections would later take place. I was then sent to Imperial Valley and organized cantaloupe crews in Arizona and California. In 1977 I became regional director for the Delano office.

Another proud moment came when I was selected to join Jerry Cohen, Marshall Ganz, Dolores Huerta, and Gil Padilla as part of the delegation to the Democratic National Convention in New York. Cesar Chavez nominated Governor Jerry Brown to become president of the United States. This was the convention of 1976, in which Jimmy Carter was nominated to be president of the United States.

In 1978, I left the union and went to work with the state of California. My wife entered the health profession and provided health services to the poor. I would continue to support and volunteer in many activities of the union. I served as an honor guard at Cesar Chavez's funeral.

My wife, Christina Cuellar, passed away in 1997. Among those who attended were Artie Rodriguez, Dolores Huerta, and members of the union. Linda Rodriguez, wife of Artie Rodriguez and daughter of Cesar Chavez, presented the eulogy.

Presently I work with the California Secretary of State's office to promote voter registration and civic involvement among farmworkers and other underrepresented groups.

My family and I are proud of our participation with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers of America.