

Julie Kerksick 1974–1977

I owe a lot to the UFW. I worked as a volunteer and then as a member of the boycott or field staff from 1970 to 1977. Through those years and experiences, I fell in love with *La Causa*, learned how to do effective organizing, met hundreds of inspiring colleagues, made some lifelong friends—and met and fell in love with my colleague and future husband, John Gardner. So whatever I gave to the UFW in terms of time and talent and treasure, I received that much and more in return.

I was a student at St. Louis University when I began volunteering on picket lines at grocery stores and liquor stores for the St. Louis UFW Boycott effort. Richard and Barbara Cook led the effort there and were powerful magnets for many of us. They fostered a sense of community that encouraged people to participate in a variety of activities with one clear objective: creating economic pressure on growers in California by getting consumers and stores to stop eating or carrying grapes, lettuce, and Gallo wine. If we succeeded in doing this, we would be effective partners with farmworkers who were trying to achieve better and safer working conditions for themselves. The idea that individuals living in cities could positively affect the lives of farmworkers living and working thousands of miles away was incredibly powerful to me. It was so powerful that it led me to join the staff of the UFW and eventually to commit myself to organizing as my life's work.

Cesar was my role model as an organizer. But I had many mentors who helped me learn how to do this work: Richard and Barbara Cook, Richard Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Nick Jones, Eliseo Medina, Fred Ross, and Crosby Milne were some of my major teachers. It was not always easy, because they, like Cesar, like all of us, are human. What I learned in those years has continued to resonate in every bit of my life: personal, professional, political, and communal. Much of what I learned was positive and focused on how to do the work well. Some of the lessons turned out to be the very effective learning that comes from failures, large and small (for example: the New York City Central Park Walk-a-Thon in 1975.....aaarrgh).

I moved to New York in early 1975, and joined the New York boycott staff. (You've heard the slogan, "Join the Navy and see the world." I joined the UFW and saw much of the United States.) By October of 1975 I had been reassigned to Coachella, California, to work on the union drives made possible by the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act in California. It was an amazing, though exhausting, time.

I met Filipino farmworkers who had lived here for decades, too poor to return home, too poor to bring over their brides. I got to know Mexican and Chicano families whose children had worked harder and longer in five years than I had in my entire life.

I got to know people behind the stories that had inspired me back on the boycott. Farmworkers were and are like the rest of us: varied in the ways that they approach life and its challenges. They weren't all saints, just as we middle-class volunteers were not all saints.

But we challenged each other and taught each other and boosted each other and tried to do our best. The growers and their accomplices were used to winning, and it was incredible to be part of forcing growers to recognize the rights of their workers.

One of the hardest lessons for me in the transition from volunteer to staff was the cultural clash I experienced as a woman. While the union had strong women leaders and organizers, there was a pattern of limiting the role of women to administrative support. That was painful and tested my burgeoning relationship with John, but we survived. But it was part of our decision to leave California and the excitement of the field organizing.

John and I returned to the boycott, going back to run the St. Louis boycott until we left in 1977. We left because we wanted to apply what we had learned in the UFW to urban areas, particularly to seemingly intractable issues of long-term unemployment and underemployment. Our friend and UFW colleague Dan Willett eventually joined us and relocated to Milwaukee with us in December of 1980, where all of us continue to live.

Today, we are all still doing work that we hope helps to create real power and opportunity, as well as economic security, for people who don't have it on their own.

The UFW taught me to believe in the impossible, even when success was not fully achieved. Nothing can diminish the achievements and changes that were wrought by the wonderful and unlikely alliance of farmworkers and urban dwellers. Even though the union's impact has not always been what we hoped, it achieved more for its members and all farmworkers than any previous effort. Its impact goes beyond its immediate constituents, too; it is still felt through the commitments and achievements of hundreds of its former staff who have gone on to apply what they have learned in other efforts. Cesar Chavez's impact has grown over the decades, as has the influence of other early UFW leaders, to inspire and influence efforts to win economic justice and civil rights for all.

I remain grateful to the UFW and all the hundreds of colleagues who fostered in us a sense of community and purpose that continues today.