

Frances Smith 1975–1989

Building a Farmworker Movement

In 1975 I was assigned to the Los Angeles boycott—Inglewood area. It was an adventure, for sure, and a learning experience. For housing we home-sat, moving every few weeks into a new home. At one home we could use any of the garden foods. In another, we had the use of a car and dogs to care for. I let the dogs outside, only to be driven mad with fleas. There was no other solution than to let the dogs back inside. I slept on a plastic couch to avoid getting bitten. In the last home, we had just finished making new UFW flags, drying in the front room above the fireplace, when the family returned. This was not a UFW-supportive family, and we had to leave immediately, wet flags and all.

One event that occurred that summer is especially memorable. We were accustomed to working long hours, so the day we managed to get all the grapes off the shelves of the stores targeted for that day, we got to go home early. What had happened was that at the first store the police were called and showed up from two districts, the store being at the crossroads of the two. What with so many police around and them threatening us, all the customers left. We were finally informed that the grapes were being removed, so we moved on. The other stores got word of the police activity at this store, and before we could picket them, the grapes disappeared. Unwittingly, the police were a big help and gave us a much-welcome break.

In the fall I was assigned to the Cincinnati–North Kentucky boycott, my area being North Kentucky. How I loved the Kentucky hills and curves! Catholics sometimes questioned whether I had the bishop's permission to work in the diocese. Protestants had no such problem, and I soon was provided with workspace and a telephone. House meetings were the clue to organizing, and getting pledges the clue to financial security in keeping the office open and the communal house costs solvent.

One Covington store in particular became a favorite, as the manager was very cooperative. We let helium balloons with the boycott message float to the top of the store, did a blitz on putting stickers on cars, and had banana brigades, where each person buys a piece of fruit, lines up at the check-out counter, and begins to chant. Finally, we asked the manager if we could pray at the grape counter. He not only gave us permission, he joined us! The grapes stayed, but we found our match in a nonviolent approach.

The funniest thing I remember from these boycott days was our singing “We Shall Not Be Moved,” for the prune boycott. There were maybe eight or 10 of us lined up that day, with the ever-enthusiastic Mary McCartney leading us. We broke out of our usual disciplined style when we realized how humorous this was. Later, when we had live boxes of prunes rotating in front of the Kroger Company building, we did better!

Because the Kroger company headquarters were in Dayton, Ohio, we took the long walk from Northern Kentucky to Dayton, an unforgettable 60 miles, walking and carrying large signs, sleeping on tabletops or wherever, when given hospitality. We

weren't only volunteers; we were also community, bound together by conviction and action.

Then Proposition 14 came along and my companions all left for California. I had to travel to Columbus, Ohio, to close the boycott activities there. It fell to me to look for new housing for when activities would resume. (What, no more roaches?)

Many calls went to La Paz to petition for a move there. Finally, in December of 1976 I was given the go.

My first assignment was to the switchboard—an old-fashioned kind that I'd seen only in the movies. Lori Huerta and I sat side by side, Lori addicted to sunflower seeds and the shells landing in every direction. Soon, though, it was amazing to see the technology being set up by other volunteers in the high elevations of California in order to give the UFW a radio communication system and a sophisticated telephone system. I graduated to the new phone and a bright, cheery location at the administration building's entrance.

During this time I climbed the mountains at La Paz with a visitor. We were two hours away when I jumped in order to sit down and join my companion. "Crack." I heard my foot break. Having had a course in Silva Mind Control, I knew something about setting a bone in place. This I did, and as long as I held it I didn't have too much pain. Meantime, my companion began the long trek back to find help. There was a long wait, and the vultures began to circle. I released my hands from my leg just long enough to chase them away. When finally the stretcher arrived, I was carried to a car some distance away. The Red Cross was called to check the injury. They said I didn't have a break, but just to be sure I was taken to the hospital. Of course, there was a break, but the folks there couldn't understand how it was such a clean break. It wasn't easy explaining how I myself set it!

Then came those first computers. I was given a tutor to help me polish up my typing. A temporary computer was brought in. I was told to learn it and teach the others. What a thrill! The day passed rapidly, I remember, as I spent hours by myself, figuring out how the computer worked.

Later, we were set up with an air-conditioned room. The programmer who sold us the computers came to get us started—and often, to make repairs. We learned to make copies and store on the huge memory disks. After that the entire printing process was upgraded. Seems like only translations still had to be done by sheer hard work.

I recall one time when Cesar was pretty upset with us. We'd run off zillions of form letters and overlooked a typo. Why was proofreading so difficult? Could it be because we were up all night doing security?

Oh, and how could one ever forget "the Game"? We were supposed to learn how to defend ourselves verbally in this grueling time. It was to help us build character. We could accuse others of anything we felt like. It was up to the accused to fight back. I

often wondered just how we benefited from this exercise, but since I was quite shy, I figured it was some help to me.

By the time I moved from the former hospital to the former nurses' building, I had had good experiences with the veggie kitchen group. We had had a meeting and decided on a schedule for cooking and eating. This was right before we started playing the Game. Cesar had already investigated Synanon and we knew he was planning to have us begin "The Game" at La Paz. The day after our kitchen meeting, Cesar asked to see me. He wanted to know why we were moving ahead with the Game before he initiated it. I didn't know why our meeting was so threatening. I explained that we were organizing our kitchen to work more smoothly. This meeting with Cesar scared me, I guess, made me wonder what was going on, and made me uneasy. So when I moved out of the kitchen to a room of my own, I was on my own for cooking and felt freer, but I'd learned a lot from being part of a common kitchen.

Our general meetings at this time were scary. People were accused of being spies and publicly thrown out of the union. Some friends were forced to leave. We never knew who would be the next one to be asked to leave. It was a difficult time. I couldn't imagine the danger of spies to the UFW. For me, volunteering was a ministry, a call to serve, a way to follow the Gospel.

Liturgies at La Paz were very special. A priest officiated. Protestant ministers did parts permitted the laity. All participated. We were truly an ecumenical body celebrating our faith and our lives.

One Holy Thursday we washed each other's feet. I got to wash Helen's, and she, mine. Another Holy Thursday we celebrated a real Seder meal. The prayers were sung in Hebrew by Marc Grossman, and we ended up with Eucharist. These are occasions I'll always treasure, so tastefully, simply, and humanly done.

Communal meals on special occasions were also special. There was always a double menu, one for vegetarians, another for those preferring meat. It was impressive to see all of us gathered on these occasions. I still admire the work of the cooks, who always were pleasant and made the delicious food.

I liked to walk around La Paz and enjoy the solitude. Once, I came upon a fawn stuck in a fence. As I released it—it was much heavier than I thought it would be—it bellowed loudly. When I looked up I saw a herd of deer watching me. I only hoped they didn't blame me for the fawn's predicament.

Once we were given the option of going to Los Angeles to work on the Jerry Brown campaign for governor. I went. The Saul Alinsky training we received has served a lifetime. I learned to register voters and saw how effective this task was under the tutorship of Alinsky's methods.

These are but bits and pieces from my full-time UFW volunteer work. In reality, it seems like another life I lived. The experience was invaluable. I made lifetime friends, gained untold skills, made mistakes I've learned not to repeat, and in many ways, came

to a new maturity. These little things, I believe, also helped build a union, first of workers, then of volunteers who only wanted the best for the workers. *Si Se Puede* lives on in my spirit and heart and life.