

Caren Jacobson 1976–1980

I joined the volunteer staff of the UFW in 1976 as an outsider. I knew very little about the organization. I had volunteered on a kibbutz in Israel a few years prior. It is a living system based on cooperation. An Israeli neighbor of mine in Boston knew of the UFW and knew I wished to venture out using my nursing skills. She suggested I work with UFW because, much like the kibbutz, its work depended on community and cooperation. One of its goals was to help others help themselves. I then signed up, so to speak.

I was working as a nurse in Boston and headed out to Coachella to help staff with its relatively newly opened clinic.

The Coachella field office staff of November of 1976 was still relatively small (as compared to staff present in the spring of 1977). As staff, I attended the weekly evening farmworkers' meeting. It was a highlight of the week for me. However, I do recall at first feeling I had possibly come to join a cult. It made me feel a bit uncomfortable at first, rising in song, swaying to the music, arms crossed and hands held to the sounds of *De Colores*. I was immersing in a new culture, one I grew to respect and love.

The *Si Se Puede* mantra was the most inspiring dictum of the UFW. It called out to all of us, no matter what our line of work. Prior to Coachella, I had worked at Massachusetts General Hospital, a large hospital in Boston. There I was a cog in a huge wheel. With the UFW I wasn't a cog, but I was the wheel, and sometimes you were made to feel like you were the whole damn machine.

It could feel overwhelming at times, but in general it was exhilarating. Probably what made me feel so good was the enormous support and teamwork I shared with others.

The most inspiring individuals were the farmworkers themselves. They had much to gain but also the most to risk, and yet they were willing to put themselves right on the line. Many worked tirelessly to fight for the changes needed to improve their lives and their children's lives.

The spring of 1977 brought high energy to the Coachella Valley. Organizers came from every nook and cranny to bolster our forces. What had been a group of 15 to 20 volunteers participating in all-staff Tuesday morning meetings (drink way too much coffee) planning a campaign turned into an army of about 200. (This number comes off the top of my head. It comes from images of rows of chairs and helping to set up for these meetings and may be a slight overestimation.) This army was equipped with many generals barking out orders to get the forces to work in harmony. The goal was to win elections at as many ranches as possible simultaneously. Organizers were covering many fronts concurrently. The air was electrifying and the temperatures were sizzling (4 a.m. was the only time of the day that felt comfortable). The troops were largely successful in the election campaigns, at least to the best of my recollection.

After the campaign many of the staff moved onto other sites, but there was still a strong core of staff left with the challenge of negotiating and administrating contracts. These were empowering processes for the farmworkers involved and an education for all. Winning elections was exciting, but negotiating contracts and working toward consensus was a whole other level of commitment. Again, I was pretty much an outsider to this process but appreciated the opportunity to peek in on the action.

After the campaign we continued to have Tuesday morning all-staff meetings. I recall one Tuesday morning that seemed to be a turning point—we were working through the aftermath of the elections, and I believe Eliseo Medina was running the meeting. He posed a question to us. He asked, “What are we? Are we, the UFW a [social] movement or a union for workers?” It was a seemingly simple question with an obvious answer, but somehow redefining ourselves in a business-oriented direction was a bit difficult for many of us. But it was an important question for all of us to face in order to help move us in a more focused direction. It brought us all to the same page.

My actual day-to-day work was in the Coachella clinic. There, working as an R.N., at times I functioned as a nurse practitioner, at other times more like a pharmacist, and at other times struggling to find volunteer physicians to staff our clinic. Always at the end of the day our job was to mop the entire office and scour the toilets.

In my role as a nurse, I had the opportunity to be privy to the personal lives of farmworkers and build warm and trusting relationships. There was a high level of appreciation by the farmworkers for the care we had to offer, though fragmented as it was at times. I recall making home visits and then only truly understanding the plight many farmworkers faced.

My years with the farmworkers were some of the best years of my life—the friendships formed have bonds of steel and bonds for life. I recall that Cesar’s funeral, though a time of sadness, was also a time of reuniting. It was an opportunity to reconnect and see where so many had grown and gone. Some people were still working with the UFW, but most of my connections had moved into other walks of life. In spite of this, there was still a connecting bond. People were still working with passion and commitment. We were all still striving in our own small way to make a difference for humanity.

At the funeral, I recall meeting farmworker families from Coachella Valley. There were young adults, who had been children in the 1970s, who were telling me of their college experiences. Had it not been for the UFW giving their families stability, allowing families to remain in one area for a school year, I doubt these young adults would have had this educational experience. To me this was one sign of success of the UFW.

I suspect what I personally took away from years working with the farmworkers was not unique, but still special. It instilled a new belief in myself and knowledge of what can be

accomplished when forces join together. This became a framework of my life today. I am still very appreciative for those four years I spent in the beautiful Coachella Valley that sent me spinning for a lifetime.