

## Victoria H. Lopez 1977–1981

### *Si Se Puede*

When I came to La Paz as a UFW volunteer in the summer of 1977, I quickly learned that Cesar Chavez believed that we could do anything he asked us to do. Sometimes he asked very difficult things of us, and was upset when volunteers doubted they could carry out his tasks. “*Si se puede,*” he would say. He just did not take “no” for an answer. That’s how I ended up doing things I never thought I would do. Cesar gave me the ability to believe in myself. As a result of that experience, I eventually became an attorney.

### The Board

I arrived in La Paz in August of 1977, as a 20-something-year-old journalist from San Francisco. My first assignment was to write, publish, and send out a bilingual newsletter from Cesar to the workers. I really knew very little about the inner workings of the union at that time, so Cesar invited me to attend the board meetings. I was to gather information that would be newsworthy to the union members or potential members. It was such a thrill to watch firsthand the board members interacting, sometimes laboring, over difficult decisions that would have a monumental impact on the union. Not that Cesar, Dolores Huerta, Eliseo Medina, Richard Chavez, Jessica Govea, Marshall Ganz, Pete Velasco, and Gilbert Padilla always agreed on everything, but they all respected each other tremendously and it was apparent in the way they communicated. In every decision the board made, the bottom line for Cesar was how it would impact the workers. The workers’ best interests were at the heart of every decision.

### The Radio Program

My second assignment was to produce and air a daily closed-circuit radio program from La Paz for the 200 or so residents. Every afternoon I went “on the air” for an hour, updating the UFW staff at La Paz about UFW organizing efforts, new contracts, promotions, and the latest La Paz news bits. I really enjoyed this job but had to be careful what I said or the wrath of some staff member would come down on me during our weekly sessions of playing the Synanon Game. The Game was a way for people who worked and lived close together to get things off their chest in a way that didn’t hurt others. It was often a great way to let off steam and to laugh and bond with one another. I usually enjoyed the Game, even when the heat was on me.

### KUFW

My third assignment (in 1978) was to help Ken Doyle set up the FM radio station in Woodlake, near Porterville. I was to prepare the programming portion of the FCC application and Ken was doing the technical work setting up the station tower and

preparing the technical side of the application. We set up a separate entity called Farmworkers Communications, Inc. Cesar was the president, Gloria Doyle was vice president, I was secretary, Ann McGregor was treasurer, and Ken Doyle was executive director. It's hard to believe we got this station approved by the FCC and on the air despite opposition from the growers, a lack of funding, and the lack of training (none of us really knew what we were doing, but we couldn't tell Cesar that). Finally, KUFW was licensed around 1982 and continues to operate to this day. It was the first in a fleet of stations that were developed.

## Huelga

Shortly after I finished planning the programming for KUFW, the lettuce strike of January 1979 began in El Centro, and my leisurely life at La Paz ended. It would never be the same again. Everyone went into a strike/ boycott existence mode, meaning you never knew when or where you would be sent next. But it could be on a moment's notice (and usually was).

My first strike-related assignment was to work with Marc Grossman, Cesar's press secretary, doing public relations work. After the death of Rufino Contreras, a martyr who died on the picket line on February 10, 1979, I began to help Marc write press releases, set up press conferences, and travel to New York and Los Angeles with Cesar on press circuits. It was an exciting yet sobering time—1979 was a tough year. We worked seven days a week, including holidays, from early morning until late at night.

## Legal Department

In May 1979, Cesar transferred me to the legal department, where I stayed for the next two years. Around that time, the UFW board had made a decision that the dozen or so UFW lawyers would no longer receive salaries but would switch to the volunteer status of all the other UFW staff members. It was also decided that the entire legal department would be transferred from Salinas to the headquarters in La Paz. Not all the board members agreed on this point, and there were several very heated discussions about the change. Ultimately, the board voted to eliminate the lawyer exception to the volunteer rule. It was the beginning of a power struggle on the board that would later become a major split, with Cesar, Dolores, Richard, and Pete on one side, and Jessica, Marshall, and Gilbert (Eliseo had left by that time) on the other.

Cesar had also become alarmed at the number of decisions being made by the legal department without board input, and he felt he had lost control of the legal department. No one knew what all those lawyers were doing up in Salinas. Legal policies were being implemented by Jerry Cohen, and the board would find out after the fact. It was decided that the lawyers would move to La Paz and Cesar would personally supervise the legal department. To say the lawyers were extremely offended and upset by this turn of events would be an understatement. They called a meeting with Cesar in Salinas and basically

grilled him for a couple of hours. But Cesar could not be moved to change his mind, so all the attorneys quit en masse. By the time the dust had settled, only Dianna Lyons and Marco Lopez were left standing. Marco recruited Carlos Alcala, a Harvard Law School grad, to help him lawyer, plus myself and another young woman to be the entire clerical staff. Of course she and I had no clue what we were doing (don't tell Cesar—*si se puede!*) and we were in Salinas during the middle of a strike, with workers getting arrested daily, so the attorneys were constantly in court and didn't have time to tell us what to do or how to do it. Our godsend was Larry, the legal secretary from the previous regime, who stayed through the summer to help us out. So the legal department limped along, while 400 cases were transferred to the new attorneys under the hostile glare of the former attorneys, two board members, and the Salinas field office staff. It was not the smoothest of transitions.

### Back in La Paz

By December of 1979, with the help of the Bruce Church strikers, we had moved the entire legal office to La Paz, and now our group of lawyers consisted of Marco, Carlos, Ellen Eggers, Frank and Carmen Fernandez, and Freddie Chavez (Richard Chavez's son). Dianna Lyons continued to handle appellate cases out of Sacramento. Cesar had this idea to turn the children of farmworkers and some of the staff into attorneys. In California you can intern with attorneys while studying law and after four years take the bar exam. We recruited "paralegals" from within our ranks to study law: Chris Schneider, Ned Dunphy, Lori Huerta, Barbara Macri, etc. Marco and I went to the home of Marcos Camacho and persuaded him to drop out of Fresno State and come work for the union. Marco promised Camacho's dad (a farmworker) that his son would be an attorney some day. Marcos Camacho not only became an attorney, but the head of the UFW legal department.

### The New Legal Department

Cesar decided to make major changes to the way the legal department was run. At the time, Cesar was very into MBO and other management tools for the union. We spent days meeting as a group to decide the mission of the legal department and the organizational chart. I was promoted to paralegal coordinator to keep track of the work the paralegals were producing and make sure deadlines were met. We tried to operate as a team and in many ways we were successful. I remember one night Ellen Eggers and I had to finish preparing, photocopying, and finalizing a brief that had to be postmarked by midnight. We finished at 11:30 p.m. and flew in the car to the Bakersfield main post office, arriving with one minute to spare. All the way back to La Paz we laughed about what a great time we were having working for the union and being able to get done what had to get done despite the lack of sleep and never-ending deadlines. Eighteen months later we were no longer laughing and enjoying midnight runs to Bakersfield. We were all worn out and getting on each other's nerves. The stress had gotten to the breaking point.

My last day at La Paz (Memorial Day 1981) was one of the saddest days of my life. I had found such acceptance and happiness in that community, and so many friends, that it was

hard to leave. For a long time after, Marco and I continued to visit La Paz on the weekends and the union was still part of our lives for several years after we left. What I experienced during my time with the union will always be a part of who I am, and I am proud to have been a contributor to the farmworker movement through the UFW.

### Some of the Memories

I have some wonderful memories of my four years with the union, including:

Cesar's birthday parties

Community meetings at La Paz on Friday nights

Skits we performed at the community meetings

Making lunch for 200 people on the Saturday workday

Working in the community garden in La Paz

Meeting celebrities like Jane Fonda, Valerie Harper, Governor Jerry Brown, etc.

Our community kitchen in the "hospital," in which we all took turns cooking

Rosemary Cooperrider's fresh-baked bread

Pulling guard duty at the gate all night

Three Peaks in the spring

Going for pizza in Tehachapi

Larry and Annie Tramutt's nonalcoholic wedding (in which every one got drunk on table wine)

Jerry Cohen's "motivational" meetings ("Guys, I need you to get me all the evidence together by tomorrow morning, cuz I'm not going into court holding nothing but my dick in my hand.")

Sharing all the victories in the courts, in the fields and in Sacramento.