

Louis Campos 1961

Cesar Chavez Thought About the People

“The food was on the table getting cold ...”

He sat in this small, crowded office, pencil in hand, waiting on the people. Cesar Chavez was a field representative for the Community Service Organization, his small office more fitting of a cottage, was situated on Vine Street, in the heart of the barrio, in Visalia, California. His dutiful assistant was Gilbert Padilla, a fast-talking in-your-face rabble-rouser. By all appearances Cesar was doing all the hands-on-work while Gilbert was out in the community “organizing.”

The year was 1961 and it was the beginning of a hot summer. The summers of the San Joaquin Valley can get very hot! I had just been discharged from the military, and Cesar’s office was across from my home. One day I dropped by his office, it was a slow hot day and not many people were coming by, so we had some time to talk about what he was doing and his thoughts about the future. He had a passion and fierce drive for discussing and promoting societal changes. He was unrelenting in his talk that change had to come from the bottom up, that to have power you had to take power. “Rarely will those in power hand over power,” he said. His method and personal way of conveyance was neither threatening nor confrontational but, in a subtle way, his message ran deep. He left an impressionable imprint in our community.

A few years later and after his rise as leader of the National Farm Workers Association, Cesar was back in town and he quickly found his way to North Visalia—the barrio. He came to our house, my mother answered the door, and he said hello and was about to introduce himself when my mother interrupted him and said: “Yes, I know who you are and you have been causing a lot of trouble ... however, probably good trouble.” she said. Cesar let go with a big sigh of relief. “At least she is a friend,” he probably thought. Cesar began to explain to my mother if she would be willing to invite neighbors over to our home for an evening meeting so that he could share his thoughts about the farmworker movement and to seek help from the community. My mother agreed, but only if she and other women of the community could make a meal for the occasion. Without having much of an option, Cesar agreed to the condition.

The meeting was set for the next evening. Chickens were sacrificed and cooked delicately in the red mole sauce. The pinto beans and tomato-colored rice were cooked with the same loving care. This was Mexican food like no other. About 25 neighbors were invited to eat and hear Cesar Chavez tell them about his social movement and the urgency involved. The women had worked hard all day in the hot kitchen preparing the meal.

The meeting hour came and neighbors started arriving. Shortly thereafter, Cesar arrived with several of his associates, including (and this is to the best of my recollection) El Flaco,

the pencil-thin mustached Gilbert Padilla. The tables and chairs had been arranged so that Cesar would sit at the head table. The food came out and the rich aroma of the mole wafted throughout the house—a delicious meal was at hand. The people lined up to be served and Cesar was served while at the head table. Grace was said and it was time to eat. Cesar stood and he said, “ My friends, I cannot eat this meal knowing that many of our fellow farmworkers are out there tonight with nothing to eat.” A freezing silence captured the moment. My mother, the cooks, and the rest riveted their eyes on Cesar. My mother, with both hands on her waist and a chillingly stern look, told Cesar, “Eat!” With a half grin he politely sat down, picked up his tortilla, and ate his mole.

Understanding the timing of when to comply allowed him to be the great leader that he later became. Without this understanding he probably would have become mole himself. He understood the power of the Mexican woman. The meeting was a success.