

Legacy of Cesar Chavez by Richard Ybarra

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Introduction

As we prepare to celebrate another spring of our lives and the review of memories and lessons of Cesar Chavez, I am offering some personal perspectives and reflections that I have never written before now. Though I have many recollections of his teachings and example, in this column I will share my remembrances of my time with Cesar and my observations of his family and movement lives, which were one and the same. While Cesar Chavez Day festivities and events usually celebrate his deeds and achievements, this piece will focus on how the journey involved his wife, Helen, their eight children and now their thirty-one grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. The future of the Chavez Legacy is in their hands and I know they are all eager and ready for the challenges.

Legacy of Cesar Chavez

For Latinos and other poor people in the United States the journey to acceptance, understanding, and justice has been long and difficult. We all know the stories and challenges. One man among Mexican, Central, and Southern American descendents reached the pinnacle of American history. Cesar Chavez, who died in 1993, taught many to overcome the fear to succeed and gained worldwide fame for his achievements for farm workers and other underrepresented workers.

Small in stature, dark skinned with a fierce drive for justice Chavez's life inspired several generations and continues to inspire new immigrants to live in dignity and without fear as we claim our place in society and history. He remains our soul and inspiration and no one will change our history, no matter how hard they try. He will always be our sage of the ages. ¡Cesar Chavez! ¡Presente! ¡Viva este hombre de dignidad y valor!

There are many ways to look at heroes like Chavez, King, Gandhi, and the Kennedys. All inspired followers and all struck fear in those who would deny them their goals and rightful places in history. Chavez's 66 years earned him a great reputation, as he became our beacon of life. He knew with fame came great criticism and as he often said, "if we make a difference in the life of only one farm worker or poor family, then the sacrifices and the hatred we face is worth it." Today, this eighth grade-educated farm worker stands as a role model for all generations, earned the honors celebrated today, and endured personal attacks during and after his life.

A sample of his friends' beliefs and reflections of him demonstrate his placement in history. When presenting the first Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Peace Prize in Atlanta, GA in

1973, King's widow Coretta Scott King declared, "Cesar Chavez, you are a great and sainted leader who is the rightful heir to my late husband Martin, as the national leader of nonviolence." In 1993, while attending Cesar's funeral services Ethel Kennedy, the noble widow of Sen. Robert "Bobby" Kennedy, asked what it was like knowing her husband, King, and Cesar Chavez remarked, "Cesar was a saint." When her late husband Bobby joined Cesar in breaking his first public fast in 1968, she stated, "Cesar Chavez is one of the heroic figures of our time." At Chavez's April 1993 funeral mass, an audience of nearly 50,000 farm workers, youth and people from all walks of life listened as Cardinal Roger Mahoney said, "Cesar Chavez was a special prophet to farm workers."

Achieving greatness comes with a price. Families of great persons must find ways to deal with and overcome personal attacks, and even attempts to rewrite history. Today, when I hear stories of what some say they said to him twenty and thirty years ago, when I was present, I laugh aloud. What I recall, they not only did not express any of those thoughts to him at that time, but they would only say yes to him and never criticized him to his face. My own grandfather used to say, "Don't leave a party early, or you will be talked about when you leave." I think now another life truth is "Don't die before your enemies because they will lie and attempt to rewrite your life history to diminish your accomplishments in light of theirs."

With this in mind, I take this time to share some of what I knew about Cesar and his family that many who admire him may not know or have heard before now.

Cesar Chavez was a success mainly because his family joined and supported him in his fight for justice for farm workers and equal rights for Latinos and other poor and working people. During his lifetime, countless people and groups visited with him to learn how to deal with challenges and struggles in and out of labor.

He and his family faced more struggles and challenges than most of us could ever imagine. Just the number of death threats, and grower and mafia contracts on his life would make most people fearful and have their families give up or quit the struggle. Not Chavez and not the Chavez family. For them quitting was and is not something they knew or will ever do, no matter the price. Leaving or abandoning farm workers as so many of our colleagues did over the years is just not an option for anyone named Chavez. The only other families, who endured as much, were those of Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez.

When Cesar decided to leave a high paying job to live in voluntary poverty and work among the poorest and most exploited workers, his family was with him. His widow, Helen Chavez, a soft-spoken woman of strength and courage stood by him, worked side by side with him, and supported him throughout his life. Today, she is retired and the leading steward of his life and legacy – the mother of his remaining seven children and the grandmother of the future legacy carriers who are their 39 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The background story of Helen and Cesar's children has recently become a topic of discussion. I worked for him, with him, and joined his family when I married his daughter Anna. I have not worked for him or with any of his organizations since 1982. I have no current role in their business of working with farm workers and poor people across America. I worked side by side as his assistant for four years and may have spent more one-on-one time with this man than anyone besides Helen and his siblings. I have given many speeches and talks on him and his life. In those talks, I speak for myself and that is still the case. No one asked me to write this story.

Family members, who followed his working footsteps, can speak for themselves. I speak about Cesar Chavez, the person, and what he did to teach, inspire, and motivate tens of thousands of people during and after his lifetime.

Now back to his wife Helen and their family, which now numbers seven children and 39 grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The Chavez children grew up in their father's volunteer poverty, completely involved in his struggles. They were too young to have a voice in choosing poverty, fame, or the hatred they encountered from his enemies. These aspects of Cesar's life I want to extract and remember.

When Cesar started his movement, there was no money. His children were his only volunteer organizers. While other children their age were having fun, playing sports, and enjoying free time. The Chavez children were with him in every Central Valley town going door-to-door handing out leaflets and talking to farm workers about their father's dream of a union, credit union, and other economic and social services. They joined Helen working in the fields to feed and house themselves, and fund Cesar's movement. I cannot imagine many people enduring that lifestyle and still loving their father and mother. They more than paid their dues.

When the 1965 grape strike began, things only got worse for them. Eldest son Fernando endured personal attacks or that of his father almost everyday by the growers' sons at Delano High School. Sylvia, Linda, Eloise, and Anna had to face extreme prejudice from the schools just for being their father's children. Rumors spread their father, who never earned more than \$5,600 in a year, had a tunnel from their poor two-bedroom house to the mansion they went to at night. All untrue and crazy, but very much a part of the Chavez family lives and told in other ways still today.

The younger children, Paul, Elizabeth and Anthony, were not quite as exposed to the grape strike school controversies, but at young ages knew the threat of bombs at their home, and that people wanted to kill their father and them and some were even being paid to do it. The 24-hour security around their home provided by Filipino and Mexican strikers became the status quo. To their everlasting credit, they never complained and stayed as normal as any poor, famous family could.

Their father's vow of poverty meant their clothes always came from donations. Second

hand was their only hand when it came to clothes, toys, dolls, or bikes. The kitchen cupboards were always bare, no different than the cupboards of the farm worker families the Chavez family would each devote much or all of their own lives serving.

I have always been amazed and impressed at how Helen and the Chavez family handled themselves in the face of their lifetime of poverty; death threats and powerful enemies who wanted to see them fail. Their strength and unity helped them survive, succeed, and follow the humble footsteps of Cesar and Helen.

For nearly 30 years, the most any of them made for pay, like Cesar, was \$5 a week and later \$10 a week or a little more plus room and board. How many families in the last fifty years could survive and remain loyal to the cause under these circumstances? Of 40 something family members, ten work for the movement and the others live their own lives and help the movement. The average Chavez family member makes about \$5,600 a year from the movement, about the same as Cesar made a year. The ten who receive salaries are modestly paid at best. There is no rule that because my father chose to be poor, own no car or home, which says I have to do so as well. Cesar did what was best for him during his time, and his family should do what is good for them, while continuing his work. No one can be Cesar Chavez, Dr. King, Gandhi, or Bobby Kennedy.

So why would anyone wait until 13 years after a hero like Chavez was gone to attack him? Why would anyone want to tear apart his family and sell a story saying they were getting rich off him? Answer is easy. Chavez faced the exact same attacks repeatedly from people, who wanted to stop him, and his children will face them as well.

Today, his children and grandchildren are the guardians of his legacy and leading voices, who protect and enhance the future of today and tomorrow's immigrants. Hurt them and you harm the Latino American future. Discredit them and you provide opportunities for others to keep our people down or gain power at the Chavez family's expense. Cesar and Helen did not raise any fools and they did not raise anyone to get rich off his work. Helen and Cesar never owned a house. Helen still lives in the rented 800-square-foot home that at times was home for seven people. Son Paul lives in a wide trailer on the movement's property and Anthony and his family live in a rented home as well. Of the three Chavez children, who work in Cesar's movement, only Elizabeth and her family own a modest home. Four of the remaining seven Chavez children do not work for the United Farm Workers of America Union or for the nonprofits founded by their father. 26 of 31 Chavez grandchildren do not work for the movement for pay, though they all volunteer time to UFW and the movement. Those who work and those who do not work for the movement organizations donate hundreds of hours each year speaking at schools and functions to continue the legacy of Cesar Chavez. I am sure this will continue.

Cesar and Helen somehow managed to raise their children to live good lives. As youth, there were no private schools, no new cars, no new clothes, and only eldest son Fernando attended college to become a San Jose attorney with a very successful law practice. As

parents in an era of gangs, guns and drugs they raised eight children who raised 30 grandchildren and so far, thanks to great parenting and family life, embody the same virtuous values as their grandfather and none have experienced drugs or the criminal justice system. The grandchildren were schooled by Cesar and Helen, and will somehow follow their working examples to improve lives and promote peace.

The year Cesar died a Los Angeles woman in a high school mentoring program for Latino students said to me, "I would love to meet your wife, and thank her and her family for giving us their father. I am sure they had to sacrifice and give up a lot so farm workers and others could have him as our inspiration."

As the coordinator of Cesar's funeral services, I made sure many people who had left their voluntary work with Cesar were invited to join us. Today, I am reminded that like what happened to Jesus and others, some would attend, pray with the family, and later betray him for whatever selfish reasons.

Though he did not live to see the full success of his farm worker's movement and his next planned movement in cities working with poor people and new immigrants, Cesar died knowing his sons, daughters, and grandchildren would carry on what he and Helen began with nothing. While all follow their footsteps, some get paid, most do not, and all of them volunteer to share the Cesar Chavez story in schools, libraries, union halls, and neighborhoods and give of themselves to farm worker and other communities across the country. They will continue to build housing and find other economic opportunities for poor workers, just the way their father did in his life. It is how Cesar would have wanted it. Our job is to progress and persevere with pride, dignity, and without fear, just as he taught us to do. While we know he is with his savior and has a special place in heaven, we proudly celebrate his memory when we say ¡Viva Cesar Chavez! ¡Cesar Chavez, Presente! Thank God, the real history cannot be changed or rewritten, though some will try. Knowing you are number one in the hearts of so many you inspired, Rest in Peace Cesar.

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Victor, I found a speech Cesar made in 1984 at the Commonwealth Club, maybe you were there. I will list a few of them here and you can decide whether to add them in my piece or as side bar quotes from Cesar....I think you will like them....

"All my life I have been driven by one dream, one goal, one vision: to overthrow a farm labor system that treats farmworkers as if they were not important human beings. That dream was born in my youth and nurtured in my early days of organizing. It has flourished and it has been attacked.

" We attacked injustice not by complaining but by organizing. By addressing this historic problem we created confidence, pride and hope in an entire people's hope and ability to create the future."

"The coming of our union signaled the start of great change among Latinos.that are only now beginning to be seen."

"From time to time you will hear our opponents declare that the union is weak, that we have no support or that the union has not grown fast enough. Our obituary has been written many times. How ironic it is that the same forces that argue so passionately that the union is not influential are the same forces that continue to fight us so hard."

"Our union will forever exist as an empowering force among Chicanos in the Southwest. That means our power and influence will grow and not diminish."

"I am told these days that farmworkers should be discouraged and pessimistic. Republicans control the governor's office and the White House. Yet we are filled with hope and encouragement. We have looked into the future and the future is ours. 20 and 30 years from now in Modesto, Salinas, Fresno, Bakersfield, Imperial Valley and other California cities will be dominated by farm workers, children and grandchildren of farmworkers and not those of growers."

Like other immigrants, the day will come when we win economic and political rewards. That day may not come this year or in the next decade. but it will come someday. We shall see the fulfillment of the passage from the Book of Mathew: 'The last shall be first and the first shall be last.' On that day our nation shall fulfill its creed and the fulfillment shall enrich us all."