

Dorothy Coyle

TAPE 100 CR 152, SR 72 TC 03:00

03:00:07 Um, Dorothy we're talking about stuff that happened a long time ago in the, in the sixties um, at some point you were living a normal life and, and you heard or you read in the newspaper, somehow it came to your attention that there was a strike going on in Delano and that there was a boycott. Do you remember how you first, what, how you first responded to that?

00:26 Oh yes I do. It was a natural response that we would support the boycott, we would support the strike. There was never a moment uh, doubt about it, debate about it.

00:39 Was there something, I mean what was it about the farmworkers situation or what you had learned that, that really connect, you connected with? What, why would you support that as opposed to any other quote cause?

00:53 Well basically uh, the initial support came through my support for labor in general and that does go back to school days and to my work days after school and to a general uh, sympathy towards the working people and towards unionism but specifically concerning the farmworkers movement um, I think several things. First of all um, I really resented an attitude that I observed amongst many people who were not supporting the boycott, certainly not all of them but many that oh well these are Mexicans they are used to stoop labor, they are used to pov, poverty, they are fortunate they are working in this country um, not fully seeing the need for their support. Uh, perhaps another personal um, impetus was

the fact that as the daughter of Irish immigrants who knew full well what it was to dig potatoes out of the hard earth of Connaught in western Ireland and who knew what it was to watch as three million Irish men, women and children died or left Ireland during the years of the great famines during which time beef and corn were being shipped to England. I really personally am offended by exploitation, find it particularly offensive.

02:17 I mean did the farmworkers struggle was, was also.....

CUT

02:30 I mean unlike other labor situations the, the farmworkers was sort of an extreme situation. It was sort of characterized as David vs Goliath. These were people who really needed help. Was that important to you? As opposed to seeing the strike somewhere, did you sense that, that this was a real special case?

02:44 Yes of course it was. I had read through the uh, early sixties about the migrant workers and the plight of the migrant workers throughout the whole southwest and perhaps particularly in California so I was not ignorant of the conditions in which they worked and what I found particularly appealing if you will or of particular concern for all of us was the fact that these people were helping to put food on our tables. You know the basic need of life. Uh, we all eat and it seemed to me simply a matter of playing fair that I didn't feel people should suffer needlessly or, or live in uh, often horrendous situations, conditions in order to feed us grapes.

03:35 So it doesn't, it doesn't sound like, it sounds like the issues were pretty clear cut for you. It wasn't a decision you had to agonize over before deciding.

03:39 Never. Not at all.

03:42 Um, when you made that decision did you, how, for example you had a, a family, you had children so part of it is you explain to them. Do you remember having discussions with your kids? How, how did you explain it to them?

04:01 I don't recall specifically but I do know that whatever I supported as far as whatever we purchased, whatever was served was something that was accepted by the family and the children did understand the rationale behind why we were supporting the strike.

04:25 Um, I, I ??????????????? they still find it hard to buy grapes. It's like a habit you can't break where you, once the contracts were signed

04:32 Yes it was. It was for awhile and then uh, as the boycott was reinitiated...

 Part of, I forgot to mention one thing before I started I'm sorry to interrupt you.....

CUT

04:45 Um, I want to switch gears for a second. Um, you were, I think Laurie told me or maybe you told me but we talked that, that um, that supporting the boycott was not something you do in a, in a group it's like a personal decision, is that right?

04:59 Yes it is. Um, it's....

Again I need you to say supporting the boycott.....

05:08 Yes from the very beginning supporting the boycott was a personal decision. Um, it was not made as a communal decision but it was clear within our family and it was certainly clear to me that um, what we were going for was an accumulation of effect. That the individual suffering of a person not being able to eat table grapes which are delicious, sweet, juicy you know and we missed them, ok we missed them, we lived without them. This is not a huge problem on one level in California where you can pick up a cherry or an apricot or a peach. So that the degree of suffering was really not the important thing involved. The important thing involved was we were acting in community and we were pushing for an accumulation of effect which it took a number of years to accomplish and finally bring about I think you know about twelve percent of the people actually finally supported it. So that it was uh, an individual plus individual type of thing to me.

06:11 Now let's, let's switch gears and, and talk a little bit you, you mentioned some early influences that in fact these were ideas that were introduced to you in school that you acted on.

06:23 Yes. Oh well some I uh, when I attended college we read social Catholic philosophers and their ideas about the humanity of men and the rights of men were rooted firmly in the democratic ideal. That we all shared the same should share the same political rights, the same social rights and it was from that that all their thinking concerning labor evolved. Um, it was an interesting comment made by Maritain one of them concerning those who did not support labor, he called them heretics which is a term generally uh, saved for those who break away from faith. Who move off...

Serious, serious differences.

Serious differences from whatever faith they belonged to. If you break from that you are a heretic. His point was that if you didn't fully support the democratic ideal with your full heart, with your personal conviction you were a heretic, you were a lay heretic. So that for example if you could eat grapes during the time that a grape boycott was on you were not fully supporting the democratic ideal. It was as simple as that but it was, it was this commanding and demanding as that.

07:45 Um, you're, you're a Catholic. You learned Catholic religious teachings. Um, the other way these things came together was that the farmworkers movement, movement had a deep religious base too.

Yes.

Did that, did that resonate with you, did, when you learned that it's, it had a religious point of view?

08:04 Well of course we all saw the pictures of Cesar and the United Farm Workers attending mass and attending mass and receiving communion in the fields and so there, there was that connection always between uh, certainly Cesar as the leader and the Catholic faith. But I cannot say that it was because this was a group of Catholics who were involved in a labor activity that that influenced me at all.

08:32 But let me put it this way, as a Catholic didn't it, as a Catholic who supported social teachings it must have pleased you to see them being carried out you know to see religion being used in such a positive way.

08:43 I cannot honestly say that's how I looked at it. I did not look upon the activities of the United Farm Workers as Catholics acting out, their beliefs as Catholics. I saw them as suffering workers demanding their rights and for me that was rooted in two things: their basic humanity which indeed was taught by the church through, through the Popes, through those two basic Labor Encyclicals, and through those um, social philosophers who based their teaching on democracy. The full participation in democracy meant this is what you support. You support the freedom of labors, laborers to live a decent life. So that I can't say that it was a direct connection in my mind ever with this was a Catholic movement.

CUT

09:34 I mean the, the question in general is, is apart from not buying grapes there were other ways in which your family's have crossed the farmworkers' family there were other connections. Tell me a little bit about that.

Yes. My husband who was a physician uh, went down during the summers of the late 1960's years down to Delano uh, where he worked in a converted mobile home, had been converted into a clinic and in that clinic he provided medical care during his vacation time for the families, for the workers themselves and for their families and he was committed to that and he was happy to participate in uh, in the work that was being done there. He uh, did get to know and to like and admire Cesar Chavez and he particularly enjoyed working with the, the migrant workers themselves. It was very obvious to Jim what he was providing for them. He uh, enjoyed that kind of clinical medicine, clinical medicine within families and he did not in his professional life have the opportunity to do that so it was certainly professionally very um, interesting to him but certainly beyond that he was contributing to the care of the farmworkers and he knew that and was uh, you know I think proud and happy to do that.

10:54 Yeah I mean he could have been taking a vacation but he was doing good work instead.

10:56 He could have been taking a vacation, yeah.

So were your children out there?

11:00 He took several of our children down at different times. Anne and Pat and Chris and uh, several of them went down a few times with and it was uh, an experience for them.

Can you hang on a second

CUT

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11:18 Um, tell me that story you were just telling me about your son when he went down with, with his father and took a friend along with him.

11:22 Yes, well my son Chris and my daughter Anne both went down several times and on one of those occasions Chris brought along a neighbor friend, Lee and the children were able to see their dad working within the clinic itself, in the mobile home and could see him doing all kinds of things that they had never seen dad do before including telling the patients to dig in a box of old glasses to find eyeglasses that things that he had saved up that he knew they would not have access to it and Lee was so impressed by the care Dr. Coyle was giving uh, so generously to the United Farm Workers and was so taken with what he had accomplished that he uh, it was a big part of his becoming a doctor he has told us.

12:08 That must feel really nice.

Yes of course it is.

12:12 You know um, when I worked for the union I, my, my daughter was seven at the time I took her around and people, people criticized me they said children should live sheltered lives, they shouldn't be exposed to difficult things. How, how did you feel about your kids seeing that part of the world they didn't normally see?

12:26 Oh that seemed perfectly natural to me that my children would see that part of the world and had Jim or the children not been interested I would have wanted them to see it. We did live uh, middle class very comfortable lives. We were in our little Catholic middle class ghetto if you will and of course it's healthy for children to see people who live in different circumstances who do not have all the things that they have so it was a really positive experience and um, they enjoyed it if that's the right word. I mean they certainly learned a lot uh, and they were proud of their dad.

13:07 Um, after ???? the farmworkers movement was, was very strong in the sixties and seventies and then, then it faded from the public consciousness. There are still migrants out there and they're still living horrible lives. Why, why do you think people stopped caring or did they stop caring?

13:23 Well you know even at the height of the success of the boycott they're only twelve percent of the consumers throughout the country even that supported it so I think uh, we tend to stay asleep, stay in our own cubbyholes, wrapped up in our own individual lives and our own needs and we really need to be awakened by particular leaders who will you know lead the charge who will show us uh, ways in which we can act outside of ourselves beyond our own needs so that I think after the heyday of Cesar Chavez and the uh, United Farm Workers and after the contracts were initially signed they went off the front pages, they went out of our minds, we did start to eat grapes. Um, I think we are due and overdue for some shock treatment again. I really do think that the needs of the farmworkers are in the back of our minds if they're there at all and uh, there is not that um, in your face kind of um, publicity if you will, awareness amongst the average person and it is the you know the average person, middle class people, the working people who are

eating the grapes. Who need to be told you know if you believe in your whole heart as you say you do in this democratic charter you can't, you simply can't. It, it's simple but it's demanding. You support the boycott if you say you support the democratic ideal.

15:03 It seems pretty clear. The other thing we're, we're trying to figure out with this film looking back is, is do you think, do you think that experience, do you think when Chavez woke the country up to the plight of the farmworkers and when they, do you think that changed America at all? So are we a different country because of that?

15:22 I would certainly like to think that we're a different country because of Cesar Chavez but um, I'm not convinced that we are. I think in recent years certainly if anything there is a growing negative attitude toward Mexican workers indeed toward Mexican immigration, the whole question of legal and illegal immigration and that's being caught up in this whole thing about Mexican workers, what they contribute and how they should be treated and how they need not be treated and they really are two separate and distinct questions but I think in the mind of the average person, certainly in the uh, political atmosphere in California today. It's not on the front burner at all. I don't know if it's on the stove even at all.

16:15 And it's funny too because it sort of, it has this sort of a thing the, the same things that people were saying when they wouldn't support the boycott now they're saying again even louder. It seems like those issues have come back.

16:26 Yes uh, well since the years of the boycott, of course the boycott went on during the late sixties you know the decade of, of turmoil

and ferment and uh, civil rights movements and beginnings perhaps later on of the women's movement and there was this whole uprising of people demanding rights and then we moved into uh, a different decade, different times in which we became in our personal cocoons if you will and were considering our own needs and only our own needs and these are protective devices that we all use and I would think that some degree it's cyclical and to some degree it's connected with the uh, condition of the economy at any given time. So that if the, if your economy is being pushed and and there is a shortage of jobs for people who are not highly skilled it's the old case of low man on the totem pole and once again um, you know I think Mexican workers are considered low men on the totem pole and, and not really of a major concern to the average uh, Californian at all. Perhaps it's time for marching with our banners again. There's the whole problem of the danger of pesticides in the fields and uh, and how much is that being considered, how much is being done about that. So that perhaps we need another um, some more shock troops.