

Jessica Govea

Tape 103, CR 159, SR 76

04:40:13:21 Jessica let's start off tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up, what your parents were doing and your early experiences working in the fields.

04:40:24:04 I grew up in Bakersfield California uh, in Kern County. And I grew up in a small barrio in Bakersfield called

CUT

04:40:36:20 Ok Jessica tell me a little more about how it was growing up in Bakersfield.

04:40:43:29 Uh, I grew up in a barrio in Bakersfield called "the, the Little Oakie" which is at the foot of RT 58 and what was it like? It, it my time working in the field began when I was four years old. It was before they had brought the cotton picking machines in so that's the first harvesting that I did was picking cotton into a twenty-five pound sack that my mother had made for me because I was too small to pull a hundred pound sack.04:41:10:29

How can a four year old pick cott, cotton?04:41:12:04

04:41:12:22 You learn. You uh, it was hot. It was uh, sticky. It was very long days. Um, my bad memories of working in the fields are that when you wanted to go to the bathroom there was, there weren't any bathrooms and so you felt very

embarrassed. Um, held it as long as you could and then you went and you were embarrassed. Uh, and the other memory is just of a very long day. So that what it was....like.04:41:44:10

Your father started out as a bracero tell me about his experiences.

04:41:47:00 My father came uh, when he was twenty years old from Mexico City as a bracero to work on the track gangs in Arizona and then he came from Arizona into California to continue working on the track gangs. One of the places that they landed in California as a crew was Hanford near Corcoran in California and I remember him telling us a story about how the food was spoiled but they were feeding them was very bad food.04:42:18:10 And so they organized themselves all this big group of young Mexicanos and walked to Fresno which was some long distance to go find the, the consul, the Mexican Consul to ask them to do something about it. So it was a very tough way to make a living.04:42:37:03

Uh, your mother and your father were, were some of the many people that were attracted to CSO when it began starting in the fifties. What kind of people were, were drawn to CSO and what kind of organization did they create?

04:42:49:29 Well my parents joined CSO when they were in their twenties and uh, the way that they joined or the reason that they joined was because this man came and knocked on our door and it was Fred Ross and he came and said, how do you feel about the conditions you're living in? 04:43:09:23 Do you want to do something to change them? And he proposed that one way they could be changed was through self organization and so that's how my parents got involved along with a lot of other people. There were Mexicanos, there were uh, veterans, young

Chicano veterans who came back having served their country and angry about what they came back to and this was the nucleus. It was, it was young couples in their twenties and in their thirties with young families. 04:43:39:19 Mostly blue collar workers, farmworkers who decided to band together and try and take on some very critical issues in our community like police brutality and discrimination in uh, hiring, voter registration discrimination, just you name it there was discrimination going on in those, in those years against Mexicanos and against what we then called ourselves Mexican Americans.04:44:03:23

Now was this some Anglo coming in and telling you what to do or was this you building, you and your parents building your own organization?

04:44:09:18 Oh not at all. It was, it was Fred Ross coming in to say if you want to do something I will work with you but it's got to be you that does it. And so it was my parents and their associates building their own organization. And I think the greatest strength of the Community Service Organization is that it was self organization. 04:44:32:15 And one of the best uh, uh, indicators that it was self organization was that people paid for it themselves. It was, it was a dues paying organization. It wasn't somebody coming in to do us a favor. 04:44:45:03

Well talk a little bit more about how that leadership developed and how they debated issues and, and also in the context of the fifties and the McCarthy period.

04:44:52:07 Well it was a, a time when, when raising your voice about, about problems that existed in your community made you a Communist uh, because it was during the McCarthy era you were accused of being a Communist, a radical, a, all kinds of names that they would call people. And in spite of that uh, the, the

folks in our barrio and in other barrios in Bakersfield and all across the state of California decided that they had to, that there was nobody else that was going to come in and, and change things for us that we had to change things for ourselves. And so the, the people in CSO formed their own chapters. 04:45:35:08 People paid dues into the chapter, they held monthly meetings to discuss issues. My strongest memories of growing up as a child is going to CSO meetings because Fred in particular emphasized and then Cesar when he became an organizer with CSO emphasized the importance of this being not an organization of men and our community was very traditionally father dominated but it became an organization of men and of women and of children. 04:46:06:27 We all, we all went to the meetings. And we didn't but we the children didn't speak up in the meetings but we heard and we saw how our parents worked with other people who were like them. Debated in a respectful way but in a very firm way issues that were important to them and made decisions by raising their hands and making motions and taking votes and then acted on those decisions by going out and working. They worked very hard all day at their jobs and then they would come home, our parents would come home and then go out and knock on doors until it was dark. 04:46:42:23 Get people registered to vote. Get people to become members of CSO. Get people to go out and do actions wherever they needed to be done, at whatever public institutions they needed to be done.04:46:54:20

So looking back at the experience now do we, do you look at CSO now as, as something that really brought families and communities together and made them stronger?04:47:06:16

Absolutely. Absolutely.

I need a sentence.

I'm sorry. Um, ask me again.

Do, do you see that CSO brought families and communities together and made these ties?04:47:21:11

04:47:22:25 CSO in uh, Bakersfield and throughout the state of California and in parts of Arizona very much brought communities and families together because the spirit was a very positive one and a very forward moving one that was one part but the other thing is that they set goals and then they worked to achieve them. It wasn't just talk, it was action. 04:47:47:11

And, and that's important because when you show people they can get something done then....

04:47:50:25 When you show people that they can get something done you can't stop them. Cause once people see that they have that power within them I have to tell you a, a story about my mother who was up until the time she became a member of CSO, my mother was very, very shy. If someone came to the door it was very hard for my mother to talk to them, that's how shy she was. Once she became a part of the Community Service Organization she and some of the other women in CSO were organized by Fred Ross into setting up a um, a volunteer service center to help the members. 04:48:33:19 And my mom through that, she became one of the volunteers and through that she became a very outspoken advocate and would go and fight with people at Motor Vehicles and fight with people at the welfare office and fight with people wherever they had to be fought

with in order to uh, in order to rectify things. Uh, in order to rectify discrimination that was going on or in order to rectify abuses that people were being made to suffer.04:49:04:16

CUT

Ok Jessica when you were a little kid most kids look forward to summer vacatin what did you look forward to?

04:49:13:25 Most kids do look forward to summer vacation when school is about to end. We had very mixed feelings about it. I mean it was nice that school was going to end but where we were gonna head was to the fields, to pick any number of things. To pick tray grape or raisins, to pick onions, to pick prunes, to pick potatoes you know....04:49:39:03

Is that normally the way you thought of it or did you think other kids are having a vacation why can't I have a vacation?

04:49:44:11 I guess, I didn't really feel resentment until I fully realized that other kids had very nice vacations that they got to go do a lot of fun things during the summer time that those of us that worked in the fields didn't have the opportunity. Now we had, we enjoyed our families and we enjoyed Sundays with our families but we also had to work hard during the week.04:50:13:00

Well it's sort of like, it's almost like you have to grow up sooner than you should have to. You have the responsibility when your a child right.

04:50:19:15 Yes you do. Very much so you do have to grow up very fast. You uh, you have responsibilities growing, well we had a lot of responsibility growing up in our home as well as working in the fields. So you mature quickly.04:50:35:23

CUT

Tape 104, CR 160, SR 76

05:00:02:26 Now we're going ahead a few years to 1968 when, when the farmworkers really decided that it's not a question of a boycott here or a boycott there but a general boycott and, and you have memories of that meeting in Filipino Hall when Cesar sort of put it out and how people responded, tell me about what happened then.

05:00:20:11 My memories of uh, the boycott discussion at Filipino Hall in Delano in 1968 were that Cesar said well we need to do a general boycott and if enough of us go out we're gonna have it, we're gonna win it really fast. And so the first question he asked was who was willing to go out on the boycott.

05:00:42:10 So a bunch of us raised our hands and then uh, he said now who's willing to go anywhere. And so fewer of us but still some of us raised our hands and that's how I ended up going to Toronto, Canada. 05:00:59:08 Be, because I raised my hand twice. And I ended up on the boycott in Toronto. I at the point when we left for the boycott in Toronto I didn't know it was in another country, I didn't know it was three thousand miles away. I, I didn't know anything about, about how far it was and I certainly didn't know that we weren't gonna win the boycott until September of 1970. That it was gonna not be a couple weeks but actually almost two and a half years later.05:01:28:02

So there you were in another country, a young farmworker woman um, in a, almost in an impossible situation. It was very, very tough on you wasn't it?

05:01:40:07 The boycott was tough because we went out, on the one hand it was tough and other hand it was incredibly a, a wonderful and liberating experience but the tough part was that when I went on the boycott I was twenty-one years old and uh, the mission was stop the grapes. Whatever it takes stop, whatever you have to do do it and stop the grapes. And we went with, with practically no money. We went with a name or two uh, in the town, the city that we were going to. Now as it happened in Toronto the name that we had was Dennis McDermott who was then the Canadian director of the United Autoworkers who turned out to be one of the most wonderful friends that the union and the boycott ever had because he gave us a lot of support in a lot of different ways.05:02:31:05

Let's talk about how you felt personally, you told Laurie you would cry yourself to sleep at night?

05:02:32:00 Oh actually that was when I went to Montreal but um, I am the oldest one in my family, there are five children in my family. I was twenty-one years old when I went on the boycott and when I went from Toronto to Montreal to then do the boycott in Montreal I felt incredibly far away and incredibly lonely and uh, I would in fact cry myself to sleep at night because uh, I, I missed, I missed my family. I wanted to be there to do the boycott but I really missed my family. I really missed my brothers and sisters and my parents and my whole, so it had its uh, it had its, it, it was very challenging.05:03:24:24

Now on the strike up to '68 there'd been an influx of volunteers and people filling in so there's some sort of sense of different worlds but when you were out there on your own it was really coming from one world into another world, was it a hard transition?

05:03:39:10 It was a very hard transition. I grew up in Bakersfield which has when I was growing up there was very, very racially polarized. It was very brown and white and uh, I was brown or am brown. And uh, so I grew up with a pretty high degree of, of mistrust um, because I'd never been treated that well by most white people and so when I went to Canada uh, I, we would go out in front of the stores to pass out leaflets and with our little cans to ask for donations for the farmworkers and I didn't know how people were gonna respond to us because at that point just about everybody in Toronto was white. And my strongest memory, my strongest first memory of going out on a, on an informational picketline in Toronto was when I saw these two young white men walking towards me uh, who reminded me of young white men in Bakersfield but they were walking towards me, they had shiny blue jackets on and so I, I made myself strong and I went up to them and I said excuse me could I ask you to help farmworkers by not buying grapes and they both as if on que, they both turned around and showed me their jackets which had this giant UAW emblem on it and turned back around and said we're all, we're all for you. 05:05:04:26 And they were, for me they symbolize what I came to learn about the fact that color really isn't what's important. That really what's important is what is in people's hearts and whether they're supportive of unions and whether they're supportive of people who're trying to help themselves.05:05:22:25

So, so it turned out the world wasn't like Bakersfield.

05:05:26:24 It turned out the world wasn't like Bakersfield. It turned out the world was much, much bigger and much kinder than Bakersfield.

Um, did you think it was winnable when you, when you went up?

05:05:39:01 I wasn't sure. When we went um, up on the boycott the, I'm not sure if I thought we could win uh, I wanted to win, we all wanted to win. I think part of me thought yes we're gonna win because here we are and we can't go home until we do win, right? Uh, another part of me thought oh my goodness how are we going to do this? I mean this is, we're fighting some very big companies here who have a lot of money and uh, we, they have a lot of money, we have a lot of people.05:06:14:21 And so that's, that's what it's gonna come down to is which, which counts more heavily and as we learned and, and as I continued to learn and have learned over year after year after year after year that those are the two sources of power; money and people. And if you organized people well enough, organize yourself well enough and organize people well enough you can win. 05:06:38:24

Well but I mean just jumping ahead there, there were later boycotts there was, there was a lettuce boycott that was never successful and, and during the 80's there was a (???) boycott that focused on pesticide issues what was different from them than the original grape boycott? Why did the grape boycott work and those one's not work?

What I...

CUT

Why, why was the grape boycott so successful and other boycotts such a mixed bag later on?

The grape boycott was

CUT

Uh, why did the grape boycott work and the pesticide boycott not work?

05:07:29:25 The grape boycott was as successful as it was for a number of reasons. One was that all of us that went out on the boycott were single minded about the fact that we were there to do a boycott and we weren't going home until we won the boycott and so we had to win it and we had to concentrate on nothing but that. That was one. I think the other very important factor about the grape boycott was that we developed it in such a way in all the cities that we went to we developed it in such a way that anyone who wanted to support us there, there was a way that they could do it and even, even the person who could do almost nothing for us other than not buy grapes, by not buying grapes they were contributing to the success of the boycott. 05:08:21:17 And I think making it possible for all people who cared once they heard our story because that's the other thing that we did was learn to tell our story in a very clear way and then give people a way to respond to our story. And, and that's, that, that was the key, that was the key that we went out, we engaged in, in the struggle, we, we went out on the picketlines in, in the grape fields first then we went out to where the grapes were sold and took the lead role on it but we made it poss, it was, it was not exclusive, it was very inclusive. 05:09:02:00 And we made it possible for everyone no matter how rich, how poor,

how old, how young, how educated or, or not educated uh, whether they wore a blue collar or a white collar or no collar we made it possible for everyone to participate. We didn't just make it possible for people to participate we, we asked them to leave their jobs and leave their homes and leave their school and, and just drop everything and come and work with us full time doing this.05:09:29:10

Well could you have won, could you have won if you'd been exclusive, if it's just us farmworkers?

05:09:33:12 No. No. No way. No way that we could have won. That victory in 1970 certainly it was farmworkers that took the biggest steps in, in building the organization that eventually led to that victory in 1970 but that victory belonged to a lot more people than, than grape workers in the Central Valley of California. It belonged to people all over the country, all over the continent and all over the world.05:10:01:03

Some people have said that, that the boycott was so important that at a certain point it became the tail that wagged the dog that, that the emphasis went into the boycott rather than into organizing workers.

05:10:11:10 I think the boycott played a particularly that first grape boycott and and also the second grape boycott played a very important role when it needed to play a very important role. And then when, when it was done and when, when the victory had been won then we we moved back to do more organizing back in California. And by the way it's, I mean farmworkers in California aren't the only farmworkers in this country. I mean that happens to be where it started but there are hundreds and thousands of farmworkers all over this country. Uh, they're

suffering and working under the same conditions if not worse conditions than those that exist in our state. 05:10:58:15

When you were talking to Laurie you used the term

CUT

Tape 104 CR 161, SR 76 TC 05:11

So in terms of where farmworkers were before this experience started they were really in a very low position and, and this gave them something. Talk to me about where they were.

05:11:20:00 Before the strike started in 1965 farmworkers uh, in California and in the rest of the country were, were not at the bottom of the ladder but below that and as a matter of fact uh, most people were ashamed to admit that they were farmworkers and anyone who left the farmworker community and gone into an urban center did not acknowledge their farmworker roots. That's changed now and the reason it's changed is because of what this union did. But before that all there was associated with being a farmworker was shame.

Well you, you also were talking about, about the fact that um, for everyone who went through that experience that uh, sort of defined who they were and how they approached everything else they did from then on.

Absolutely. I think that well

CUT, Take 7

05:12:28:05 Ok talk about people going off from the UFW and using those skills, that experience to do other good things in their lives.

05:12:36:14 A lot of the people that came to work in the farmworkers union as full time organizers and full time volunteers uh, certainly made a, a, a big decision and certainly made a big sacrifice because we all worked for five dollars a week and room and board which meant sleeping on the floor a lot of the times and sometimes not eating and sometimes eating but we all gained so much from our experience with the union. We learned about our capacity to organize uh, we learned that we were capable of a lot more than we thought we were capable of when we started out.

05:13:20:21 And the thing that I find so wonderful is that practically everyone who came into the union even if it was for three months uh, or if it was for fifteen or eighteen years, everyone who came through the union continues to do work in the spirit of the work that we did in the union. Uh, in a way that, that in, in, in the spirit that encourages self organization. In a way that encourages people's stretching to become everything that they are capable of being. In a, in a spirit of, of taking on problems that uh, sometimes others are afraid to take on. 05:14:01:22

CUT

Um, talk a little bit about how you think what happened in the farmworkers movement ????????????????????

05:14:21:00 I believe that the fact that we as farmworkers who were in fact at the bottom of the pile, at the bottom

CUT

05:14:36:18 Ok we were talking about the connection between the farmworkers movement and the Chicano movement

05:14:42:06 I feel very strongly that if there had not been a farmworkers movement that started in 1965 there probably would not have been a Chicano movement. But it was the fact that those of us that were considered the lowest of the low even within our own community, the fact that we were able to get ourselves together and we were able to move on changing how we lived and worked is what gave inspiration, motivation and in some case a big push to, to people, our own people in the urban communities. Not only in California but in other parts of the country. So I think there's a very strong connection and I'm glad that it happened. 05:15:30:24

Um, now here we are in the 90's things seem to have come full circle, conditions are really bad in the field, there aren't a lot of union contracts. How, how do you see the next cycle starting do you think it can be done again will it be different, will it be the same kind of struggle, what will happen now?

05:15:53:14 I think to effectively organize uh, in any working community it takes the same kind of work that it took to build the farmworkers union that we started in 1965. It takes a lot of hard work 05:16:10:14 that....

CUT

Tape 104, Take 10, CR 161, SR 77

05:16:27:18 Ok Jessica you had some thoughts on Cesar I'm sure.

05:16:31:00 The um, thing that I, Cesar was a wonderful leader and certainly was the one who had there not been Cesar there wouldn't have been a farmworker movement and there wouldn't have been the opportunity for many of us to be a part of that farmworker movement and to gain the successes that we did win. I think personally the thing that I most appreciate about Cesar was the way in which when the struggle began in 1965 for many of us that he let us become a part of the movement if we were willing to do the work.

05:17:15:16 He didn't judge. He didn't say oh you're a girl or you're a woman and you can't, therefore you can't do this. He didn't say you don't have formal education therefore you can't do that. His, his approach was if you're willing to do the job you got it, if you're willing to take the responsibility you got it. You've got to really take responsibility and be accountable for what you're doing but you got it. And that was what made it possible for me to learn how to organize.

05:17:46:02 And that's what made it possible for me to go to Canada and be on the boycott. And learn to do the things that I learned to do and to continue to this day to have my greatest love is organizing. And uh, and I thank him for that.

05:18:02:26

CUT