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'DON'T BE A MARSHMALLOW!'

By Dick Meister

It's Women's History Month, and who better to celebrate it with than Dolores Huerta.

"When I think of Dolores Huerta," playwright and filmmaker Luis Valdez said, "I think of Earth. Powerful, beautiful, fecund, challenging, conscious, yet so incredibly delicate."

She's been all of that in a remarkable career that has spanned more than a half-century. Huerta, now 77, is probably best known for her work with Cesar Chavez in the founding and operations of the United Farm Workers union. But that's been just a part of her lifelong and extraordinarily successful and courageous fight for economic and social justice.

Huerta, five-foot-two, 110 pounds, hardly looks the part. What's more, she's had 11 children to raise along the way, much of the time as a single mother.

She's traveled the country, speaking out and joining demonstrations in behalf of a wide variety of causes. She's lobbied legislators to win important gains for Latino immigrants and others. She was a leader in the worldwide grape boycott that forced growers to agree in 1970 to some of the country's very first farm union contracts -- which she negotiated despite her utter lack of experience in negotiating. She remains a leading Latina, feminist, labor and anti-war activist -- and, of course, a key role model for women everywhere.

Huerta started out as an elementary school teacher in Stockton, California, in 1955, but quickly tired of "seeing little children come to school hungry and without shoes." That and her anger "at the injustices that happened to farm workers" in the area, led Huerta to quit teaching to join the Community Services Organization (CSO) which helped local Chicanos wage voter registration drives and take other actions to win a political and economic voice.

Chavez, who was general director of the 22-chapter CSO, stressed "grass roots organizing with a vengeance" above all. Huerta agreed and generally agreed as well on tactics -- including an unwavering commitment to non-violence. But where Chavez was shy, she was bold and outspoken. She had to be if she was to assume the leadership to which her commitment had drawn her. Mexican-American men did not easily grant leadership to women, most certainly not to diminutive, attractive women like Huerta.

She was assigned to the State Capitol in Sacramento as the CSO's full-time lobbyist. It was an unfamiliar task, but during two years at the capitol, Huerta pushed through an impressive array of legislation, including bills that extended social insurance coverage to farm workers and immigrants and liberalized welfare benefits.

Huerta soon realized, however, that legislation "could not solve the real problems" of the poor she represented. What they needed was not government aid passed down from above to try to ease their poverty, but some way to escape the poverty. The way out, Huerta concluded, was farm labor organizing.

Chavez agreed, and in 1962, when the other CSO leaders and members rejected his plans for organizing farm workers, he quit to start organizing on his own. Huerta soon followed, helping create the organizations that evolved into the United Farm Workers (UFW), with Chavez as president and Huerta as vice president and chief negotiator, later as secretary-treasurer.

She, like Chavez, was paid but \$5 a week plus essential expenses.

Chavez quarreled frequently with Huerta. That was inevitable, given Huerta's excitable temperament and the harsh discipline Chavez imposed on himself and his close associates. But they were always headed in the same direction, and though Chavez was not entirely immune to the Mexican ideal of male supremacy, he was not the traditional macho leader by any means, and he marveled at Huerta for being "physically, spiritually and psychologically fearless – absolutely."

Like Chavez, she believed fervently in getting people to organize themselves, to get them to set their own goals and decide for themselves how to reach them. Huerta directed the message particularly to the many women among the farm workers.

She joined their picket lines outside struck fields, defying growers, sheriff's deputies and other, sometimes violent opponents. As one picket said, "Dolores was our example of something different. We could see one of our leaders was a woman, and she was always out in front, and she would talk back."

Huerta has paid a heavy physical price for her militancy. She nearly died in 1988 after being clubbed by a policeman while demonstrating with about 1000 others outside a fundraiser for then-Vice President George H.W. Bush, who had ridiculed the UFW and its grape boycott. Huerta's spleen was ruptured and had to be removed, leading to a near-fatal loss of blood.

She was operated on for other serious problems in 2000. She stepped down as a UFW officer that year to join Democrat Al Gore's presidential campaign, but has remained active in UFW and Democratic Party affairs, most recently lobbying for immigrant rights, helping train a new generation of organizers and joining campaigns to improve the lot of janitors, nursing home employees and other highly exploited workers.

Dolores Huerta has shown us, beyond doubt, that injustice can be overcome if we confront it forcefully, if we heed the demand she has been known to shout in urging passers-by to join UFW picket lines: "Don't be a marshmallow! Stop being vegetables! Work for justice!"