Wendy Brooks 1963 - 1967

The Story of Wendy Goepel Brooks, Cesar Chavez, and La Huelga

In 1958, I was a sophomore at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts with an urgent need to go west. To legitimize a summer in the West, my mother and I went to the National Council of Churches office in Manhattan to inquire about service opportunities for me. Several hours later, I knew I would be joining the California Migrant Ministry for the summer. I planned to leave for California a week before CMM training started so I could register as a transfer student at the University of California, Berkeley. I dreamed of leaving Mount Holyoke to study in Berkeley's sociology department, then one of America's finest.

My church raised the money for my Greyhound bus ticket to California. My family cried when I left. I smiled all the way west. Two weeks later, I was in Modesto attending director Doug Stills's weeklong California Migrant Ministry training. On the third day, we had guest lectures by two Mexican-Americans. I have to admit that I had never seen a Mexican in New Jersey in the 50s, nor had I ever interacted with minority Americans in my life thus far. Our speakers were Luis Zarate, a lawyer from San Jose, and Cesar Chavez, a community organizer from the San Joaquin Valley. One night that week after training, they took a couple of us trainees to a Mexican cantina for food and dancing. Culture shock compounded big time! The music, the food, and the crowd overtook me. This was not a movie set. This was a whole new stripe of life. People wearing faded jeans, frayed straw hats, cowboy boots, colorful long skirts, and huge smiles enjoyed the music. Strangely enough, I felt very much at home there. I felt like I had just connected with a piece of myself that I had never known before.

I spent my first California summer living in Bakersfield and working with fringe churches in Weedpatch, south Bakersfield, and Lamont. I also worked at Buttonwillow labor camp and in the huge Farm Security Administration labor camp in Wasco, where we had daily Bible school and daycare for about 100 young kids whose parents were in the fields. After the Migrant Ministry program ended, I had a month before my classes at Berkeley began. I moved into the Wasco labor camp with my favorite family, the 10-member Martinez family. We lived in two rooms with concrete floors, three paper-thin wood walls, and one screened wall with a door that hung precariously on rusty hinges. Corridas blared through this part of the project from predawn till nightfall. We left Wasco after a week or so and followed the crops north, picking grapes, being mostly outside of Parlier in a tiny filthy labor camp. I got to see the other side. I prayed never to be noticed. Like others in the field, I kept my face covered with a kerchief and my body covered with long, baggy clothes to help avoid the pesticide residues that lay on the grapes we were harvesting.

When I got to Berkeley, I quickly found that my romantic notions about the poor underserved migrant farmworkers were not particularly well received. I flunked sorority rush after being interviewed by Lynn DiGiorgio and regaling her with my stories of life in a migrant labor camp in Kern County. (I had no idea who Lynn DiGiorgio was at that point in time.) I dove into my classes with America's brightest and fell in love with the warm nights, views of the city, and the casual lifestyle of the Bay Area. But I held on tightly to the passion I had discovered for the migrant workers. Someone in the sociology department at Berkeley suggested I meet Paul Jacobs, who had just published a scathing article about a few days he had spent as a day laborer in Stockton. Paul was more left politically than anyone I had ever met, but what he said about farmworkers rang true: it's just that he wasn't particularly polite. Paul said if I wanted to learn more about farmworkers, then I should go to Stockton and meet Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla. I rode a bus to Stockton and spent the weekend with Dolores and her four kids in an old house that faced a seedy Stockton park and tried to understand community organizing. I also met Norman Smith from the AFL-CIO who was trying to form a union among the skid-row crowd in Stockton.

My family of origin was more likely to break strikes than join them. I had never seen or felt a strike or even known a trade unionist and I had never been around anyone with such ideas, passion, and smarts. When I returned from Stockton, Paul Jacobs hired me as a research assistant. He and his wife Ruth adopted me, and for years I had a room in their delicious Pacific Heights home.

After working my way through Berkeley, I received a fellowship for graduate study at Stanford University. Here I met a charismatic physician, Dr. Bruce Jessup, who taught pediatrics at the medical school and was interested in the health of migrant workers. I regaled him with my stories and we hung out together a lot. I grew less enchanted with graduate school each year and finally, after earning a master's and passing my Ph.D. oral exams, I had a life-changing coffee chat with Dr. Jessup. He told me that he was leaving the university to start a new unit in the California health department called the Farmworker Health Services. He challenged me to quit graduate school, asking me if I wanted to spend three years writing a dissertation when there are grievous problems to solve. With the anti-war and civil rights movement gaining momentum, and John Kennedy exhorting my generation to ask what you can do for your country, it felt patriotic to quit school and perform useful service.

In May of 1963, Dr. Jessup and I began work in Berkeley. During the summer, I led a survey interview team of six, headquartered in Modesto. We surveyed the general health, housing, and economic challenges of migrant farmworkers who worked the harvest. There had been precious little systematic research on migrant workers since Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange's work during the Depression. We lived in a migrant motel along Highway 99 and interviewed families every day for seven weeks. I moved back to Berkeley in the fall and spent the fall and winter analyzing data in our new state office and writing speeches about migrant health for my boss to deliver. We visited rural county health departments in

the Sacramento, San Joaquin, Coachella, and Imperial valleys, and encouraged their work with new funds and new enthusiasm. Requests for the research that I had done began pouring in from a variety of sources. The state became more interested in the research and decided that it should be continued for a second summer.

That year, we planned to study in the southern San Joaquin, basing ourselves in Bakersfield and interviewing in Kern, Kings, and Tulare counties. In Delano was a man I wanted to reconnect with: Cesar Chavez. I went to visit him, and his wife Helen joined our team as a Spanish-speaking survey interviewer. Cesar was organizing farmworkers through community service projects in Kern and Kings counties at the time and had some disdain for yet more studies like the one I was leading. Nevertheless, we spent several pleasant summer evenings at his house in Delano eating tortillas and beans, drinking Kool-Aid, and talking about his work. This was a contrast to the evenings I spent in south Bakersfield with Willie and Ethel and the hopelessly displaced black cotton picker families eating pork rinds and French fries, drinking Kool-Aid, and talking about disability payments. After a second summer at the state health department, Dr. Jessup left and the project was taken over by a fiery Irishman, Paul F. O'Rourke, who had been health commissioner in the Imperial Valley. That fall, I worked hard collating data and prepared a huge report, which compared and contrasted the health status of black, Filipino, Mexican, and Okie farmworkers.

I was living in the Berkeley hills with two friends. I had a great life. Henry Anderson, who also worked at the state health department, was a fellow farmworker advocate who became a close friend. We formed a Berkeley-based group called Citizens for Farm Labor. It included Ann Draper from the garment workers' union, Paul Jacobs, Father McCullough, a parish priest in Richmond, Bill Esher, and an assorted group of other friends. We published a quarterly magazine of articles we wrote about the challenges farmworkers faced. Bill Esher wanted to go to Delano and start a magazine for the farmworkers directly, rather than hanging out with us bleeding-heart liberals. Two friends and I—all of whom had good jobs and felt more than a little guilty about not being on the frontline of anything—decided to sponsor Bill. We sent him $50 a month so he could go live and work in the valley. A few months later, Bill was working with Cesar and had started publishing a crude newsletter called *El Malcriado.* In exchange for the $50 monthly donation, he sent us copies.

During the winter of 1965, Dr. O'Rourke invited me to join him in a new job in Sacramento. We left the state health department to join Governor (Pat) Brown's office to help begin a War on Poverty in California. I worked as a speechwriter for Dr. O'Rourke, who was trying hard to interest Pat Brown in the challenges faced by the migrant farmworkers. But Brown was a traditional vote-counter, and the valley growers were solidly Democratic and important to him. His attitude frustrated both of us; Paul was always sneaking pro-farmworker statements into the speeches he and I wrote for the governor to deliver. I was also assigned to create grant applications in the San Joaquin Valley under the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) Title 2, which supported grassroots community-

based organizations that would develop, receive, and administer grants for local improvement projects. I began working on Title 2 (community action program or CAP) grants with organizations from Gilroy to Dos Palos to Modesto to Fresno to Parlier to Delano. One of the six projects I had was with the National Farm Workers Association. I'd spend a day or two every other week with Cesar, driving around the valley in his old Volvo, going to community meetings and developing a plan to fund community organizers in various barrios.

Cesar was not like the people I worked with in other communities, who would stop whatever they were doing and sit down at a desk to work with me on their grant applications. Cesar would talk only while he was driving from place to place. I was his eager student—his community-organizing skills were of a unique bent and his ability to facilitate meetings was useful in every other project I was working on.

During the meetings, I was mesmerized by the passionate stories about injustice that the farmworkers told, and by the evolving strategies for righting wrongs that would be devised. My Spanish tutorials began. After meetings, we'd end up back at Cesar's house on Kensington Street, sitting around the red Formica kitchen table while Helen made tortillas. Other interesting people would sometimes stop in. People like Fred Ross, Cesar's teacher, and Dolores Huerta, who had left Stockton and brought her seven children to Delano so she could work with Cesar, and Cesar's brother Richard, and Helen's sister Petra. There was an energy there that I hadn't ever seen in the workplace, but then this wasn't work, it was life.

At this point in time, Cesar had 1400 members in his Farm Workers Association. Each member paid dues of $3.50 a month and received death-benefit insurance and membership in a credit union. The dues also entitled them to receive help with problems regarding immigration papers, Workers' Compensation claims, and Social Security deposits. Cesar and Dolores each earned $50 a week. Helen, who ran the credit union, earned $20. Some members saw the NFWA as a death benefit society; others were urging a strike to improve wages and working conditions. Cesar was marking time, feeling that it would be several years before workers would be ready for a true union movement. Community organizing was needed for the immediate years to come.

I was learning a huge amount about the roots and outcomes of poverty, and about community-organizing strategies among the disenfranchised—things I'd never learned during all my schooling. I met the legendary Bard McAllister and Chuck Gardinier from the American Friends Service Committee in Visalia and Goshen; CSO and Migrant Ministry activists Gil Padilla and Jim Drake, in Porterville; Ernesto Loredo at the Woodville Labor Camp; and members of more traditional church-sponsored groups: Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical. I was also learning about how the valley was artfully divided among the various helper groups and which territory belonged to whom. I personally was still very much a bureaucrat by training: putting on bandages as some called it. Only Cesar challenged this attitude of mine. He didn't go home at night and say "I've

done some good work today." Cesar was born poor and grew up to create change. All the others were do-gooders or were men of the cloth working on the "In as much as ye have done this for the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me" dictum.

I was passionate about each of the six community-action grants that were developing and grateful for what I was learning while working in each of these communities. I had driven the length and breadth of the San Joaquin until I had memorized Highway 99. When I drove up to Sacramento at night, I would see the old cars and trucks pulling off the side of the highway to discharge sleepy children and exhausted adults, who would sleep by the road under the cover of the trees growing in the median and along the roadsides. I had a passion to serve and many models from which to choose. I was earning a decent salary, driving a state car, and making a difference. But I was still confused by and emotional about poverty.

By the end of the summer of 1965, all six of my grant applications were completed and undergoing a six-week review process in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. I hoped that all six applications would receive grants from the Office of Economic Opportunity. One September weekend, I was winding down a little bit at my home in Three Rivers. There was nothing to do but wait. Sunday afternoon, I got a phone call from Cesar. The call was startling, because Cesar didn't have a telephone and didn't use the telephone in those days. (In fact, his attitude toward telephones frustrated a lot of people. Occasionally, he'd go over to his brother Richard's and use his phone, but only on Sundays and only for important calls.) Cesar was calling to let me know that there was going to be a meeting that evening in Delano at Filipino Hall that I might want to attend. An hour later, I was in my state car headed for Delano, extremely curious about what kind of meeting Cesar was inviting me to on a Sunday night. It was September 15, but I didn't get it yet.

When I walked in, late, the air was charged. Cesar and Fred Ross and Larry Itliong and some others were sitting on the stage, speaking to a packed house full of Mexican and Filipino farmworkers. Filipino Hall was a huge, dilapidated building right in the middle of Delano. To my utter disbelief, a strike vote was called at the end of the evening. Just as Dr. Jessup had challenged me to quit graduate school and join the Farmworker Health Services, Cesar challenged me that night to quit working for the state and come work for him. Without hesitation, I agreed.

Cesar invited me to spend the night at his house because the strike would start the next morning and I couldn't drive an hour home and be back by morning. When we got to his house, Cesar gathered the whole family and me and we sat on the floor of the living room and said a "Hail Mary" for every single one of the 31 growers in the Delano area. Bobo, Bertie, and Titibet, Cesar's three youngest, were half-asleep before we finished. The little kids and I slept together on the living room floor for what seemed like a very short time. At 6 the next morning, I was the only white woman on an amazingly long picket line in the cold valley fog alongside a farm road east of Delano. Workers in old cars pulled up alongside the road to go to work. The picketers challenged them not to work that day.

Many of them left, and then workers already in the fields began walking out to join *La Ligna* or just went home.

Foremen in shiny trucks came speeding along the roads, yelling at us. Picketers yelled back. It was a bit frightening and quite amazing. Something big was happening here on September 16, 1965. For the first time, I could imagine what it was like to be in the south with Martin Luther King, Jr., or out in the middle of nowhere in the Peace Corps, or picketing to protest the war. Suddenly I was part of that group of freedom fighters. My mind raced and my body numbed. At some point that morning, I suddenly realized that Cesar wouldn't take the OEO poverty grant money, and that a line had been drawn between him and his people and all the rest of the farmworker advocates in the valley, and that things would never be the same for farmworkers.

At about 11 a.m., we came in from the line. I found a pay phone and called my office and told Paul O'Rourke that I was quitting my job. A fighter himself, he couldn't argue with my decision, nor did he try. His bureaucratic assistant then got on the line and asked me to bring the car back immediately. I must say that I hadn't thought about how very inappropriate it was to have a state car in Delano that day, signed out to me. On the other hand, I told them I didn't have time to drive the car back to Sacramento. They sent someone for the car. I was terminated and I was suddenly working for $5 a week.

The first days of the strike were sheer chaos and yet, at the same time, were amazingly disciplined and controlled. Cesar asked me to cook dinner for 17 Mexican men who had walked out of the fields on the first night. He gave me $3 to buy food and sent me to Helen's sister Petra's house to cook. I had never cooked dinner for 17 and couldn't cook Mexican food. Then he put me in charge of the press, which involved talking to any reporters who called the office at Negrito Hall where a telephone had been installed and where Cesar was hunkered down with a rapidly growing entourage. Negrito Hall was one of the most chaotic places one could ever imagine working. There was a simple partition down the center of the hall and then the right side of the hall was divided into a front room and a back room, the latter of which was Cesar's office. We had a few manual typewriters and some cheap paper and a blackboard. On the wall of the entrance hall was a huge banner that said: "The Hottest Fires in Hell Are Reserved for Those Who Remain Neutral in a Moral Crisis." This was the flash point center of the whole operation for the first few weeks, and 100 people a day would come and go: workers who had left the field, picket captains, church groups, families in distress, reporters, mechanics, police, Cesar's kids, Dolores's kids, and the simply curious. George Ballis, a skinny blonde with three cameras around his neck, would check in to locate picket lines and get an update on daily activities, which he photographed in the most memorable collection that exists today. He would bring us poignant pictures for the walls of the hall.

I wrote and mailed out press releases. I talked to Bernstein from the *L.A. Times* early on; I had no idea who he or Dick Meister at the *San Francisco Chronicle* were in those days, but I gave honest and glowing reports about the progress of the strike. Cesar rented the Pink

House for me and a coterie of other volunteers who began appearing on the scene. The Pink House could always sleep as many people as it needed to; I lost my own room quickly but never gave up my bed to anyone.

The second week Cesar made me head of an all-female picket line. I had retrieved my old reliable Volkswagen and picked up Esther Uranday and her mother Carmen and their friends in Earlimart at 5:30 every morning. Then we'd be assigned some tense picket location where female energy was needed. We'd holler through the morning. My Spanish language skills were growing in a strange and narrow band; my vocabulary was becoming spiced with words I'd never thought of using. The movement or the strike or the labor interruption was growing in momentum; most people were not returning to the fields and the growers were trying to find replacement workers who knew how to harvest table grapes—not an easy task. The growers had only a short time to get all their grapes harvested before the rainy season came. We had struck at the peak of the harvest season.

The Filipinos, single men who were mostly in their 50s, had lived most of their adult lives in ranch housing along back country roads east of Delano. Now they had joined the strike en masse and had been evicted from their homes, which had never really been theirs anyway. They had always been the backbone of the table grape harvest force, so skillful and meticulous were they. To this day when I see table grapes in supermarkets, I bemoan the terrible presentation. The Filipino harvesters are gone forever. These men moved to town and hung out at Filipino Hall. Their new job was maintaining the hall and cooking lunch and dinner for all the picketers. One hundred or so of us ate there every day. We gasped, gulped, and eventually learned to love—or at least tolerate—Filipino food. People always said that Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez would never work together. Wrong. They each played critical roles and honored one another. Larry, representing the AFL-CIO, felt no more important than did Cesar, an independent waving a black-and-red flag with the *aguila* (eagle) flying on it.

Bill Esher's *El Malcriado* flyers were mimeographed by the hundreds. Then Luis Valdez showed up. Luis was a thespian, a Pancho Villa look-alike who captured the plight of the *huelgistas* in hilarious short skits that he created and performed at our Friday night meetings at Filipino Hall. Augustin Lira, a young man with a sad face and a haunting voice, and Felipe Cantu, a middle-aged broken-down farmworker and father of eight, rounded out the cast. They brought the message of the strike to us all, and they made us laugh. Augie Lira began writing more songs, haunting melodies like *El Corrido de Cesar Chavez, Yo No Lo Tengo Miedo a Nada* and *Niños Campesinos,* and translated traditional union and civil rights songs like *Solidaridad Para Siempre* and *Fuertes Estamos Ya.* We sang endlessly on the picket line and at the Friday meetings.

Bruno Dispoto was the least well-liked of the growers; he took to us with a vengeance (guns and trucks and a foul mouth) and we loved to mock him. It was hard not to like Jack Pandol, though. As a grower who had always taken good care of his workers, he appeared genuinely shocked by what was happening, He had a brain and was an orator and

interesting to talk with. But as time went by, the two sides talked less and less. The local Catholic Church, to which almost all the grape growers and the farmworkers belonged, was in a difficult position. The local chamber of commerce felt certain we were the enemy and were unjustly defiling their town and they hired a public relations man and installed him in a local motel.

The more the strike succeeded, the more hostility it generated. The mood changed in town from one of paternalistic curiosity to open anger. Cesar said we needed to get some teachers of nonviolence to Delano quickly. We called the national offices of SNCC and CORE and within a week, each organization had sent us a skilled organizer (Marshall Ganz and Bob Sokolow) to work with the pickets and be a calming presence in the community (although some would disagree). The two had new ideas about nonviolent methods to convey our message. They supported Cesar's contention that the strike had to remain nonviolent or we would all be losers. And early on, the Migrant Ministry and Catholic Church also sent staff to help. But none of these new staffers spoke good Spanish. The line between intimidation and violence was always a very thin line.

Early in the strike, a lone picketer had been ordered at gunpoint to hand his picket sign over to a grower's son-in-law, who shot the sign full of holes and then burned it. The terrified picketer ran half a mile back to the NFWA office, but he did not fight back. The growers hired guys we called "Rent-A-Fuzz" to brandish shotguns and mock police badges. These guys would walk along the row of picketers and look menacing, just inside the ranch property.

The third week, we began picketing the homes of labor contractors who were recruiting scabs. We were very present right in the middle of Delano. Every person in Delano had feelings about this matter of wages and working conditions for their grape workers. And as the strike persisted, reporters across the spectrum—from the *Catholic Worker* to the John Birch Society—appeared in town. Clergy came to inspect the scene with their parishioners on weekends. Young civil rights workers showed up. Keeping the focus clearly on the farmworker families and their opinions became more and more of a challenge.

When priests would come, they would sometimes say Mass on Sunday in the park in Delano. This was a high point of our time together. Cesar and Helen would sit on a wooden bench in the front row and 100 or so of the rest of us would sit and stand around the perimeter. A lovely banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe adorned the simple altar. Since many of the strikers were Crucecitas, we would sing the haunting song *De Colores* at every service. The services calmed everyone down.

The third week of the strike was a huge time for the movement's finances. Workers' payments were due on the first of the month. Money was in very short supply. Workers who left the fields had to be fed, transients had to be moved to work elsewhere, gas for picketers' cars had to be bought if they were to continue manning the line, and the farmworkers' old cars were always breaking down.

And the growers bought radio time on a program run by a Mexican seer named Maria Elena, who began announcing at 6 each morning that the strike was over. Some people believed her and began going back to work. Picket scouts had to redouble their efforts to find these people, follow them home, and reignite their enthusiasm. But also by this time, news of the strike had reached many supporters and help began arriving. The American Friends Service Committee agreed to pay the rent and utilities for Delano striker families, truckloads of food began arriving, and a distribution warehouse was set up in yet another rented hall. But since we weren't a real union, there was no money flowing in from the AFL-CIO's massive strike funds.

As the strike continued, the growers and sheriffs changed tactics. The sheriff decreed that picketers would no longer be allowed to shout at scabs working deep in the fields because it was disturbing the peace. This move threatened to destroy morale on the line, for it was the chatter and testimonials delivered from atop the cars that enlivened our lines. Cesar decided to test the no-talking decree rather than lose morale. A carefully chosen picket line was created to test the ruling, and 44 picketers were arrested for talking too loudly and taken to jail in Bakersfield. They included 11 women with 76 children among them. Cesar blithely asked me to take care of the 76 children while their moms were in jail. We spent the next day in the Delano town park, playing games and eating bologna sandwiches. We turned the incarceration into a major organizing tool: The evening after the jailing, a huge number of adult strikers and volunteers took all the kids down to Bakersfield with them to picket the jail, and more returned the following night. On the third day, the ACLU posted $12,000 bail and everyone was released.

A rhythm developed over time and intensified as the clock ticked down on the last, crucial weeks of the harvest season. It got colder and colder in the early morning as fall arrived. The bitter cold and foggy darkness would gradually give way to light. Headlights pierced the fog and darkness and we knew workers were coming to break our line. We jumped up and down to stay warm and hollered to energize our freezing bodies. When the sun rose over the Sierra, a new set of sights and sounds began. The menacing pickup trucks with rifles mounted across the back of the cab and big dogs riding in back would appear, driving dangerously close to us. And then the police from Delano and the county sheriffs would arrive and park just across the road from where we were picketing. All the fuzz wore shades. There were always disagreements over the boundaries between public and private land, and where we picketers could stand.

The growers were importing scab labor (*esquiroles*) and housing them on their ranches. People went out in the evening with guitars to serenade the scabs and, when they came out to the road to hear the music, the strikers would ask them to quit work and move on. Pickets posed as scabs for a day to learn about the origin, wages, and working conditions of the scabs and to tell them there was a strike going on. We got helium balloons festooned with the word "Huelga" and waved them from the roadside so that workers inside would see them. We stood on top of our cars and waved the classic red-and-black Huelga posters.

The growers ran tractors along the edge of the fields, creating clouds of dust in our faces. They turned the volume on their truck radios up all the way to drown out our calls of "*Salgense*" and "*Viva La Huelga*." The growers and sheriffs communicated with one another on two-way radios to monitor our movements. Creativity ruled in this game of shabby guerillas versus modern warfare units.

Our life was simple. All the volunteers lived in the Pink House—on the couch, the floor, or on sleeping pads. We ate our meals at Filipino Hall and eventually learned to love the Filipino food that our brothers lovingly cooked and served, day after day. We went to bed early and woke up early. We were all poor and getting poorer. We would have a beer at People's Bar for our entertainment; that was the strikers' bar. We were highly organized and responsible and would keep one another in line. Having excessive material possessions became a source of shame. We all simpled down. We lived on adrenaline and dreamed of a better future with a union contract that guaranteed wages and working conditions. We were the best of the children of the '60s. Only we really understand how profoundly we were changed in that brief golden moment of American history.

On November 6, David Perlman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on his trip to Delano with a front-page story entitled "Strange Labor Crisis in the Grape Belt." There was a picture of Dolores Huerta and me. The article said, in part:

"The boss glares at the pickets, then starts suddenly toward a pretty young woman, blonde and blue-eyed like him. 'If I was you,' he says angrily, 'I wouldn't move' and he points at an invisible line that marks that point in the dirt where Schenley's 4800 acres begins. She doesn't. Nor do the others: four of them had been jailed just last week, for ignoring a deputy sheriff's order not to shout while picketing. The boss barks his warning loudly enough for the police chief to hear, for he has just arrived with some deputies. The officers glance at the blonde woman. They know she is Wendy Goepel, 26, and though she'd hate you for saying it, she looks like a pretty Stanford coed, her silky hair, brown plaid skirt, and white blouse in stark incongruity among the other picketers. She was, in fact, a Stanford coed. She also was on Governor Brown's staff, working on antipoverty programs, until coming here seven weeks ago to volunteer all of her considerable energy and intelligence to the strike."

This really bothered me; they wrote nothing about Dolores Huerta who, along with Cesar, was the driving force behind the strike.

In June of 1966, a John Birch Society publication wrote that "law enforcement authorities in the Delano area, however, believe that the real star of the Chavez show is a 27-year-old Stanford graduate named Wendy Goepel. She ghostwrites Cesar Chavez's speeches."

It was clear that outsiders could not fathom that community organizers with brown skin were capable of organizing a movement of this dimension. It had to be their educated, white cohorts who were calling the shots, and yet nothing was farther from the truth at this

point in time. But I watched over the next month or two as the number of educated whites coming to help multiplied, and I felt that the farmworkers' voices were being diminished. I eventually left the strike to take myself out of this position. Perhaps naively, I wanted this to be their movement, not ours.

Then the harvest season was over. The growers claimed a bumper crop, but the Federal Marketing Service Commodity Report showed one-half million fewer grapes sold in 1965 than in 1964. Now what to do with the strikers? Cesar was ready. At the Friday meeting on November 9, 1965, he told everyone to gas up their cars and be at the NFWA office at 6a.m. on Monday. He assigned different cars to different fields where scouts had determined that harvested boxes of grapes were waiting to be moved. As the grapes left on trucks, the strikers were to follow them as far as they went and report back on the distribution pattern. Three days and 34,000 miles later, there was a rough map of the grape markets; the largest numbers were going to the Los Angeles produce market and the San Francisco docks. All of us single people were then reassigned to begin picketing at unloading points.

I went to L.A. with a bunch of people, where I slept on the floor of a church hall, picketed long days, ate bad food, and was exhilarated by the wide base of support that was evident for our cause. We also begged money at big factories in L.A. during shift changes, and workers would honk and give us V-signs, which were all the rage then. But the San Francisco picketers were the heroes: the longshoremen would not cross the farmworker line and a steamship bound for Asia with 2000 boxes of grapes left without its scab cargo only three days after the San Francisco picket line began. DiGiorgio, which was losing its crop, got an injunction issued against us, but the ILWU refused to honor the injunction and at the harbor, the boxes of rotting grapes just sat. This was the first union solidarity that we had ever experienced and it had a tremendous effect on morale.

But what about the trains leaving Delano laden with grapes? One of the volunteers jumped on the train in Delano, determined to find out where it was taking the grapes, but he got frostbitten crossing the Emigrant Gap on the California-Nevada border. His effort became known and soon we were informed that Roseville, near Sacramento, was where all eastbound connections originated. I went to Roseville with a bunch of others, but while the rail workers were very sympathetic, they told us they were forbidden to join sympathy strikes. We were walking the line in cold, cold weather in the middle of nowhere to no avail and after a few days, we drove back down to Delano.

It was cold and rainy and there was nothing much to do. Money was drying up as Christmas was coming and donations slacked off. There would be nothing to do until pruning season. We began picketing the local railroad loading dock where grapes were constantly being brought. We set up 24-hour pickets. Although tensions were very high there, we were exhilarated to be picketing again. One night, a truck driven by a Delano local drove right into our line, two people away from me. A farmworker was seriously

injured. We were angered and frightened and, of course, nothing was done about it, but we kept up the line: three shifts every day and night.

Cesar told us that Walter Reuther was coming to Delano; we all studied up on who he was and realized that he was very important in the labor movement. He was the first major labor leader to come to Delano and he walked the picket line at the railroad yard with us. He came with Paul Schrade, the California director of the United Auto Workers (he was later shot standing next to Bobby Kennedy). It was a glorious day of marches and a big dinner at Filipino Hall. Reuther pledged $5000 a month until the strike was won: the money would be split between AWOC and the NFWA! The UAW was giving money to *our* union. This was a crack in the mirror for sure.

Soon it was Christmas. By this time, many families were desperately poor. These were people who lived from paycheck to paycheck. And it was so cold and damp!

Paul Schrade arranged for Mattel to donate a truckload of amazing toys for the strikers' kids. Truckloads of food and supplies arrived from church groups and other friends of the Huelga. I was in charge of the distribution center, over at the food bank building. There was more goodness here than many striker families had ever seen. Some of us created a wonderful toy store and every family came in for toys and food for the holiday. And we caroled every night for a week: we sang to old workers, sick picketers, friendly storekeepers, and even labor contractors.

But how to keep awareness of the strike alive through the winter? People were planning something, and then the Friday after Christmas, Cesar announced the consumer boycott at our meeting. On New Year's Day, 16 people were each given $75 and sent to an American city where each person, alone, was to meet supporters in that city and begin picketing supermarkets. There were more than enough takers. I didn't go. It seemed like an impossible task: you go to Chicago, go to Detroit, go to New York City, alone, and begin a consumer boycott. But they did, and the stories that began floating back to Delano gave us all heart. A lot of the strike leadership was sent out on the boycott, and new leaders emerged to take their place.

It was time to begin picketing the pruning season; scabs were recruited and the picketers discovered the source of the scabs, and then more scabs came from a different place. Each day, 120 picketers were on the line trying to interrupt the pruning activities. It was winter, which meant that it was even colder and there was no work. *El Malcriado* called it "The Winter of our Discontent." Strikers knew there were donations coming in, but there was no money for them. At a meeting in February, Cesar gave a breakdown of expenses so that everyone would understand: gas for picketers' cars cost $1800; car parts and repairs cost $350; rent and utility payments for pickets were $8500; emergency medical care cost $250; telephone bills totaled $475; food for the soup kitchen was $800; boycott expenses were $900; picketing emergencies came to $650; office rent and utilities cost $380; relocating scabs cost $300; bail came to $300; and $5 a week payments to picketers cost $2500.

Just as the pruning season was ending in February of 1966, the strike received a shot in the arm from the outside: the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Migrant Labor, including member Bobby Kennedy, would come to Delano for public hearings. Bobby came with staff member Peter Edelman, and I met them at the Visalia airport. We went to the Lamplighter Inn for lunch and talked incessantly. We rode to Delano in my old Volkswagen. The next day, before the hearing, the subcommittee toured the union offices with hordes of strikers trailing behind them. When we got to the meeting hall, we found that anti-strike Delano residents had taken all the seats in the hall, and we were left outside to try and hear the proceedings.

At the lunch break, they cleared the hall and all those who had been outside were invited inside for the afternoon session. We all got to hear Senator Kennedy cross-examine the local sheriff and learn that the arrest of the 44 had been a precautionary arrest, lest the scabs assault the pickets. Kennedy retorted: "I suggest that the sheriff and the district attorney read the Constitution of the United States and reconsider their style of law enforcement." He told a local grower who testified that the grower's refusal to allow elections among his field workers reminded him of some white Mississippians' contention that "their Negroes" didn't want to vote. The hearings were powerful. We all had to listen to one another's point of view and the calls to order were frequent.

It was an emotional day, and that night labor leaders, who had flown in for the subcommittee hearings, gathered with the strikers at Filipino Hall. Jack Conway and Bill Kircher, the AFL-CIO's new director of organization who would eventually bring us all together, were there. They addressed us all as brothers and sisters. Late in the evening, Cesar took the stage to make one of his rare speeches. He attacked Governor Brown for his failure to do anything and said that he intended to vote for Ronald Reagan. He attacked Senator Harlen Hagen, calling him a southern Democrat, and said Mexicans would not vote for him next time round. And then he talked about the labor movement. He said that everybody except the AFL-CIO wanted the NFWA to affiliate with them, that he was a little lonely being outside the AFL-CIO, but that he would continue to work hard and hope to earn the right to join. Chavez's art for saving important words for unexpected movements and for understating things was brilliant that night. We were filled with hope and awe. Then, as a topper, Cesar announced that the following morning at 9 a.m., the NFWA would begin a historic 300-mile pilgrimage (*La Peregrinación*) to Sacramento, which would arrive at the capitol on Easter Sunday.

News of the pilgrimage had been withheld, although many of us had worked on it for weeks. It was Cesar's idea, based on the Mexican custom of walking long distances to historic shrines or churches to do penance during the season of Lent. The theme of the March would be pilgrimage, penitence, and revolution. All the marchers would be local farmworkers, which was an important piece. The huelgistas would march to do penance for the sins and crimes, thought of, planned, or committed during the strike, and they would preach nonviolent revolution: a new life with hiring halls instead of labor

contractors. Cesar would join them, although his body was quite fragile after the six stressful months of strike.

That Cesar stayed strong through this grueling period is a credit to his wife and family. Helen rarely participated in strike activities because she was maintaining a large and peaceful home life for her family and felt that was her role. No matter how little money there was, there was always food on the table and freshly pressed clothes for Cesar and the kids. It was hard for Polly and Sylvia, who were in Delano High School, to escape the celebrity they had unwittingly earned. They attended school with many of the growers' teenagers and there were tense standoffs that Helen and Cesar would moderate with their oldest. Linda, the third, was as fiery as they came, and was always on the frontline of strike activity. The younger ones simply needed the stability that Helen provided in the house on Kensington Avenue.

The morning of the march came and it was joyful: a warm spring day, a line of 68 chosen *peregrinos* walking east out of Delano toward Ducor, then Porterville, Lindsay, Farmersville, Visalia, and on and on with the Virgin of Guadalupe leading the procession. The line included the fiery Epifanio Camacho, who had organized the first abortive rose strike in the spring of 1965; Felix Ytom, age 55, a displaced Filipino grape worker; Roberto Bustos, who had the first baby born during the strike and named him Cesar; and Carolina Franco, the noisiest member of the women's picket line from Earlimart, as well as 64 other heroes. The silhouette of marchers against endless rows of dormant grapevines was photographed and appeared statewide. The support team members (and we were many)—driving luggage and toilets, arranging meals, visiting the town of the night, monitoring traffic, and preparing Sacramento—fell in and out of that powerful line.

Every night the marchers were hosted by farmworkers in the town where they stopped. A rally was held and meals were provided. El Teatro Campesino went along and entertained. There were always musicians: mariachi bands appeared! And always the haunting words of a song Augie wrote: "*Desde Delano voy, Hasta Sacramento, Hasta Sacramento, Mis derechos apelar*." In every town, new marchers would join for a day or so: nuns and priests, boys on bicycles, old men and women, moms with kids, unemployed farmworkers.

The line grew as the group went north, headed for Sacramento on Easter Sunday. The *Peregrinación* was a brilliant strategy. In every town, farmworkers were told about the progress of the strike and asked not to work grapes in Kern County; they were asked for financial support and moral support; and they were given a new identity as part of a proud and righteous group of freedom fighters. A flyer outlining the Plan of Delano was distributed to everyone.

On Cesar's birthday, we were in Modesto. Cesar's feet were hurting badly; people had rented him a motel room for the night, hoping he would rest. But it became a meeting room immediately. I had a stack of birthday cards for him and kept telling him to open them, but my idea of birthday didn't resonate at all. People flooded the room to talk about

the arrival in Sacramento, whether the governor would show for the celebration or not, and how the huge crowds would be handled. That was my committee assignment, so I forgot birthday and dove into logistics. When I left that night, I left the stack of unopened cards on the table in the motel room.

Then, without warning, three days out of Sacramento, the marchers learned that they had won a victory. Schenley Industries, the second largest ranch in the area, was ready to sign. It was a public relations move, the company hastened to add, but it indicated that our consumer boycott was effective. The crucial turning point in our boycott was probably the San Francisco Teamsters' decision not to deliver Schenley products in the Bay Area: a mark of cooperation that had ironic sequesters. Within two months, an agreement raising wages for all ranch employees by 35 cents an hour and establishing our first hiring hall was consummated.

The Saturday before Easter, we camped just outside the city. There were hundreds of us from all over the state, from all walks of life. We had food and water, a kids' center, a souvenir edition of *El Malcriado* and the amazing support of Father Keith Kenny, parish priest of the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Sacramento. Thousands crowded the capitol steps, marching in from the west in swells of color, festooned with handmade signs and the perennial red-and-black Huelga picket signs. It was the place to be that Easter. Only Governor Pat Brown was conspicuously missing. Speech after speech inspired the audience. And then we all went home and back to work.

As the Huelga matured, it felt less like the scrappy farmworkers' movement I felt so akin to. I talked to Cesar about it even though I knew the momentum was too well established to change now. Finally I knew I was the one to have to leave. The strike was entering a new phase and I needed to as well. We had a good last talk. He said: "Go and work with white people; they are the truly needy ones; they don't have what we have here in our family and our culture."

I went to Washington to develop rural health programs for Sargent Shriver. I used the organizing tools that were now so familiar to me. I worked in Lowndes County, Alabama; Beckley, West Virginia; Harlan County, Kentucky; and Alviso, California. I hung out with Bobby Kennedy and especially with his aide Peter Edelman.

In the fall of 1966, Cesar called and said he was coming to Washington for an AFL-CIO meeting and wanted to see me. He told me that he had a doctor now, and needed a medical clinic, and asked if I could raise the money. Peter and Senator Kennedy and I planned a fundraiser in Marin County, California, for the spring of 1967. Cesar and Bobby Kennedy would make a joint appearance at a cocktail party; people would pay $100 a head to attend. Peter and the senator were familiar with these cameo appearances; I couldn't imagine people paying that kind of money for cocktails. Fortunately, I was wrong and they were right. A wonderful Democratic Party couple hosted the party on their lawn overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Peter and I drove Bobby and Cesar from San Francisco to the party; it

was their one time alone together during that weekend. The senator pledged ongoing support to the farmworkers and I knew he meant it. At the party, I met Cesar's new doctor, David Brooks. We raised a whopping $17,210 (in 1966 dollars) at the party, enough to build the clinic. Bobby's aide Frank Mankiewicz was quietly organizing the senator's presidential bid all through the party. I ended up marrying Dr. Brooks. Quite an evening.

I wouldn't stay in Washington and work for big money; it wasn't in me anymore. I came back to California and David and I started a free clinic for farmworkers in Woodville. All our neighbors were farmworkers and most were Chavistas.

I still look at the packing labels on grape boxes at the market in Telluride, Colorado, where I have lived since 1976. In 1980, I started the Telluride Academy, a summer camp for kids that includes every local child, regardless of their ability to pay tuition. I have many brown faces alongside white faces in my camps and they are my legacy children.

A little Mexican-American of Indian descent named Cesar joined John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in the annals of American history. Then they all died and the most incredible period in my life died with them.