

Jose Guadalupe Murguia 1963 - 1991

Introduction

This essay is my husband's story as a volunteer. Although I helped him write this, these are his words. His story includes facts, but more important, it provides a perspective that illuminates the special meaning *La Union* has for him. The context of our experiences as volunteers was similar, but each of us brought something unique and personal ... and this blend gave rise to a mighty movement that shook the foundation of California agribusiness and established the union. – Kathy Murguia

Lupe's story

My name is Jose Guadalupe Murguia. I came north to this country from my village in Zapotitlan, Jalisco, in 1952. I came as a bracero after learning from my uncle, Tio Raymundo, that there were opportunities for earning money working in the fields. I signed my first contract as a bracero after being promised an hourly wage of 60 cents and housing. My cousin also came with me on this first contract. We worked in Arizona and soon learned that the money we expected to earn disappeared in charges for food and housing. We were told we had to buy what we needed from a store at the bracero camp. Because there were times in which all the money we earned went to pay for these things, I along with others began to talk, and our discontent led to a labor stoppage that involved all the braceros in the camp. The Mexican bracero representatives, Humberto Bernal and Maria Maldonado, met with us and we were able to negotiate on these issues. It resulted in the growers providing transportation for us to the local town to purchase things we needed, and our employment checks being based on what we actually earned from work.

This was the only time in my life as a bracero that a labor action was taken that resulted in an improvement in our working conditions. After completing my contract, I returned to Mexico, using the money I had earned to build a small home for my mother in Zapotitlan and another on our ranch, where my brother Ramon lived. I returned as a bracero to California in 1954. The first year I worked in the Salinas Valley for a lettuce company. In 1955 I worked in the lemon and orange groves in Ventura County and in the tomato fields in Yolo County. In the tomatoes we averaged a dollar a day; when the braceros complained, it was always the same. We were humiliated and told to go back to Mexico like *perros con la lengua de corvata*. I decided I could earn more money if I "jumped" my contract and worked on my own. In 1957, I did so and began working in the fields as an illegal. I went to the Mendota-Firebaugh area and began working as a tractor driver in the cotton field. I was paid 85 cents an hour.

It was there in 1962 that I began to hear about Cesar Chavez. By this time I had steady work with a Chinese cotton farmer who had helped me obtain my green card. My good friend Tony Valdez and I got in touch with Cesar, asking how we could join his organization. Cesar came to visit us that year. I didn't get a chance to see him because I had

gone to Mexico, but he left information about the National Farm Worker Association and other materials with Tony. When I returned, Tony and I began signing up members. The dues were \$3.50 a month and it entitled us to join the Farm Workers Credit Union and provided insurance. We received the association's newspaper, *El Malcriado*, which informed us of activities in other farmworker communities.

In 1964, I had a work accident and lost the fingers on my left hand. While I was in the hospital in Fresno, Cesar came to see me. We talked about organizing and he told me about what he was doing in Delano. It was uplifting to hear his plans for the farmworkers. I really wanted to do what I could to help when I returned to Firebaugh. Soon afterwards, a minister from the California Migrant Ministry came to the Firebaugh area. His name was Dick Sample and I began to work with him. We set up house meetings and signed up members. We also began to work with David Burciaga, who was working with the American Friends Service Committee. By the time the strike started in Delano in September of 1965 we had a solid membership base in the east Fresno County area.

I had gone to Delano before the strike to attend credit union meetings. I had spent time talking to Cesar and had met his wife, Helen, who was in charge of the credit union. I enjoyed going to the annual meetings and talking with other workers. We talked about work, wages, and problems we had in common. I was strengthened by all the talk about *el movimiento*. When the strike started, Cesar asked if I could come and help organize in the Delano area. At that time there were no strike funds. Because I had three small children to support, and was sending money to my mother in Mexico, I told him I couldn't. But I did send donations and organized other workers in Firebaugh to also do so. We continued to work on our membership drive, getting word out to the workers about the Delano strike.

From the workers' perspective, we were always ready to strike. The humiliations and injustices we endured were ongoing and always discussed. The problem was how to get together and force the growers to deal with us. *El Malcriado* was filled with information that affected our lives. Each issue was eagerly received and read. It cost only 10 cents, but workers paid a dollar in order to support the strike.

Yet for all the frustration we had, we realized that a strike was a calculated action. Our economic survival depended on it being successful. I had long talks with Dick Sample about this. What became obvious during the Delano strike was that the farmworkers were not alone. Cesar and Dolores had people from all classes and professions helping the strikers. There were volunteers, mainly students and young activists, who came to Delano to help on the picket lines. There were ministers and priests, and leaders from other unions like the autoworkers and seafarers. Lawyers came to help, as did nurses and doctors. Everyone wanted to help the farmworkers fight the growers. This was new. We became very optimistic that the strike would succeed.

In late 1966, Dick Sample talked to me about a minister he worked with. He said that the Rev. Chris Hartmire was in charge of the California Migrant Ministry and he wanted me to

meet him. After talking with Chris, I decided that I wanted to join the staff of the Migrant Ministry and work in their new worker-priest program. I could organize in the fields and at the same time have my financial responsibilities taken care of by the Migrant Ministry. I had custody of my three children--Ana, Delores, and Joaquin--after ending a marriage that had become very difficult. Chris put me on a volunteer subsistence budget. There were several other workers who had been recruited to work as a team with a minister. We had retreats where we talked about organizing and read Bible passages about how Jesus cared for the poor. We also talked about the importance of nonviolence in achieving our goals. This was easy to understand, because the growers controlled all the local judges and police and they had the power to destroy our lives if we responded to the growers' violence.

More important, I began to make a direct connection between my Catholic faith and the justice I felt farmworkers deserved. Having grown up in Catholic Mexico, I never thought of the Church as being really interested in the sufferings of the poor. Working in the worker-priest program became a basis for my spiritual growth. I was inspired *de dentro* (from within) to work to bring justice to the workers.

My first assignment in 1967 was to work at E & J Gallo. I had problems getting work there, however, and instead was hired at Joseph Gallo Vineyards in Modesto. It was easy to talk about the union to the workers. They understood the importance of joining together to ask for better conditions from Gallo. The workers became excited about the possibility of demanding a contract. I explained carefully that it was a question of timing. After having workers sign authorization cards, we talked about the Delano strike and the importance of winning contracts with those growers. We kept the workers informed of labor organizing throughout the state. We all had good expectations about the future.

In June I received a call from Chris to come to an important meeting in Delano. I went and learned I was being transferred to the Giumarra campaign. I was to work as a "submarine," which involved being hired by one of the larger labor contractors and signing up workers in preparation for a strike. Giumarra was huge, with fields in Arvin and Delano. The situation was the same at Giumarra as it was at Gallo. The workers were ready to sign up and stand up for the rights they felt they deserved. I had house meetings with all 110 members of my crew. I reported to Fred Ross. The strike was called for August 1967. We had a rally the night before and on the morning of the strike, my entire crew walked out and began to picket. The fields were empty for three days. Sal Giumarra came to talk to us and said he'd increase our wages. We told him we wanted a contract. He said he was too poor to sign with the union, but he would give us bonuses to come back to work. On the fourth day of the strike, strikebreakers began to be bussed into the fields. For those of you that were there, you know the rest.

That was also the summer that I met Kathy, my wife. She was a volunteer whom I had first seen at a credit union meeting in the spring of 1967. I met her again when I came to Delano in June. I knew she worked in the office and seemed interested in me when we talked. She left to go to Texas to help out in the strike in the Rio Grande Valley and

returned in late July. I was glad to see her when she returned. We started to stay together, and after the strike started, she was assigned to go to Oakland to help on the boycott. Before we became more serious, I wanted my children to meet her to see if they liked her. One weekend we drove to Rancho Sespe near Filmore, where my children were living with their aunt and uncle. I saw how much my children enjoyed being with her, especially Joaquin. I decided we could all live together as a family.

After Kathy went back to Oakland, I went up to visit her. We talked and decided to get married. The first year we worked on the Giumarra boycott, which soon turned into the grape boycott. In October through December of 1967, we were tracking Giumarra's wine and table grapes that were being shipped out of the Bakersfield railyard. We took down the numbers on the railroad cars and the numbers of the lead engine. We'd pass these numbers to the boycott department, who, with the help of the railroad clerks, learned their destination. When the grapes arrived at the produce markets in the cities, there'd be a picket line. When Giumarra began to use other growers' labels to ship their grapes, the boycott became a boycott of all California grapes.

During those early years, I worked on the boycott during the winter months, and would organize workers during the harvest. In the spring of 1968, we worked on a voter registration drive in the area of Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Oxnard. As the Democratic primary approached we were assigned to the *Viva Kennedy* campaign in East Los Angeles. The night Bobby Kennedy won the California primary, we all lost a great friend. I sometimes wonder what might have happened if he had won and later became president.

In the fall of 1968 we were sent to the San Francisco area and I was put in charge of the San Francisco boycott. We had many successes in getting stores to remove grapes. Some of the chains included Cala Stores, Mayfair Markets, and Lucky's. We had a big campaign against Safeway that joined with a statewide effort. We also received a strike sanction from Joint Council Seven of the Teamsters and, with the help of the ILWU, completely stopped shipments of grapes from San Francisco.

During this time my English improved and I could conduct a meeting with supporters in English. Kathy would help me with the telephones and office work, but she had a lot to do with taking care of the kids. The whole family would help out with meetings, manning tables and picketing when they could. At first we lived in the church hall at Sacred Heart Church. Father Eugene Boyle allowed us to stay there to get the boycott started. We later stayed with Martha and Arthur Schaffer. A week before our twins were born we had finally moved into a small house on Andover Street in the upper Mission. This became the boycott house and office. We had a small group of full-time volunteers working with us by this time. In May of 1969 I was assigned to Coachella to organize. This was the first of many summers I spent in the Coachella Valley organizing.

When I left for Coachella to work on the strike, Kathy wanted to return to Delano. That summer we had a lot of success in organizing workers. A strong membership was being

developed and there were many outstanding leaders who in later years formed the basis for ranch committees.

During my organizing and other work, I did not always agree with decisions made by union board members. I was fired several times over these disagreements. After talking to Cesar or Chris, I was asked to continue organizing and working with the union. Sometimes people thought they knew the workers better than the workers knew themselves and that they (the leaders) could decide what was best for the workers. This is difficult because we do need leaders, but it was—and is—important to remember how much we asked workers to sacrifice. We could not take workers for granted. The constitutional convention and later conventions were always such great meetings of the workers. I was a delegate at the constitutional convention and several others.

I continued to return to the Coachella Valley in the summers to organize and help with the strike. During the fall and winter, I had other assignments. I continued to live in Delano with my family. Ricardo and Maria had been born. In 1970 we were assigned to East Los Angeles to work on the boycott with Joe Serda and LeRoy Chatfield. In April, Cesar came to talk to Kathy and me about moving to what was later called La Paz. When I first visited, the area reminded me of my family's ranch in Mexico. Kathy and I moved there in May of 1970 and stayed there with our family for 13 years.

In the summer of 1973 I again returned to the Coachella Valley to work on the strike. This was the summer the teamsters signed sweetheart contracts with the growers in order to destroy the UFW. The workers we had been organizing and working with in previous years stood up against the teamsters and demanded elections. It was a violent summer with many beatings and arrests. That summer I was arrested more than 30 times. Twice I was beaten by teamster organizers who were former labor contractors. Toward the end of the summer of 1973, Juan de la Cruz was shot and killed by a strikebreaker and Nagi Daifullah was murdered by a Kern County sheriff. Cesar decided to call off the strike and send people to the boycott. Since I had been doing maintenance work at La Paz since 1970, my family stayed behind. Kathy worked in boycott information and I returned to work at La Paz, doing maintenance and upkeep. I also worked security and went with Cesar and others guards to make certain he was safe.

After the Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed in 1975, I worked on election campaigns during the summers. I enjoyed organizing. It brought me again into contact with the teamsters. But this time it was different. We were both working to persuade workers to vote for the union they thought would best represent them. All the rules around organizing became more difficult. Timing was also important because we wanted to file for an election at the time when most of the harvest workers would be working. The UFW Board developed an organizing school to teach organizers about the Labor Act. I graduated from this school in 1976.

There were other things I did with the union. In 1978 I went to school to learn how to become a printer. After three months of training, I returned and worked in the La Paz Print Shop for seven years. It was during this time that I started to have problems with David Martinez. He would put in a request to have something printed, then change his mind about it. It didn't matter to him if we had wasted 10 boxes of paper. Then he wanted to blame me for getting upset about wasting the workers' money. David was a social worker and a student. I didn't think he understood how workers thought or felt. When he became a board member, he tried to have me fired several times. He finally succeeded in 1990.

By this time my family had moved to Tehachapi and Kathy's sister, Pat, had helped us buy a house. Our five children--Ricardo, Maria, Raymundo, Benito and Salvador--were growing up and starting to be interested in sports and making plans to go to college. When I was fired this time, I think that Cesar had given in to David. I then talked to Sister Pat who was then in charge of the National Farm Workers Ministry and because I still was part of the Migrant Ministry staff, I was assigned to work in Orange County with supporters in that area. I worked in this area for two years. Before this, I worked with California Rural Legal Aid interviewing shepherders and providing information regarding their working conditions in preparation for a lawsuit. I worked with Chris Snyder on this campaign.

When Cesar died in 1993, I was deeply saddened. I was also worried that the union was losing ground with the workers. Paul Chavez came to talk with me one afternoon. He also was very worried. He talked about some tactics that David Martinez was using to gain support to take over the union. He asked if I would return to work at La Paz doing security work. I agreed to start right away. This year I will be 73 years old. For the last 10 years I have been working security at La Paz. When I work at night, memories of all the years Kathy and I worked and lived at La Paz with our family return to me. I know that the workers still need the union. I hope that some day farmworkers everywhere will be protected by union contracts and that they will have the social and economic justice they deserve for their hard work.

Que Viva La Union.