

Jessie De La Cruz 1964-1993

Interview with Jessie De La Cruz
by Anamaría De La Cruz
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AD: How you were introduced to the United Farmworkers (UFW)?

JD: Well, Arnold, my husband, had been attending meetings in Fresno. But the first time I got involved was when Cesar Chavez came to our house in Parlier to talk about forming a union for farmworkers. I was in the kitchen, making coffee for our guests. I remember one of them was Cresencio Mendoza, who was the general organizer in Fresno.

I stayed by the kitchen door, listening to what they were saying, and then Cesar said, "Arnold, your wife should be here, she's a farmworker and she has to know about the union." So I sat down and got involved with the union.

AD: What year did that house visit take place?

JD: About the early part of 1964, I would say. After that we had many house meetings and many people would come to our house. Some were volunteers, some were farmworkers, others were supporters, and they were all there helping us.

AD: What happened from there?

JD: Well, before I became a member I was out in the fields talking to people about the union. And I thought I was organizing them, even though I wasn't an official organizer. We would attend the meetings in Delano every week, and I always wanted to sit up front, because I wanted to hear everything that was being said. And everything I could get my hands on about the union, I would. Later, they made me an organizer, and I was told that I was the first woman farmworker organizer out in the fields, organizing farmworkers.

Out in the fields, I was talking to people about the union and the benefits they would have. We always spoke about nonviolence. Cesar always told us that we could accomplish more by being nonviolent than by being violent. Whenever they called me bad names I would just answer, "Viva Cesar Chavez!" You understand that in any language. It wasn't easy going out there talking to farmworkers who were not under a union contract. We would tell them the benefit of working under a union contract. A lot of them became involved, became members. But others would say, "Oh, we don't care, we're going back to Mexico as soon as work's over." But I knew they were going to stay. And they did stay, and eventually we organized them too.

When I was first organizing, people came to help us. The AFL-CIO sent us an organizer from New York: Paul Sanchez. He came to talk to us about running a hiring hall. And I remember Fred Ross, Sr. coming to my house to some of the meetings. And LeRoy Chatfield came to meetings at my house. And many others who had experience organizing. So I learned a lot from them.

By the late 1960s, I was in charge of the hiring hall. It was at our place. We had a small house next to the one in which we lived, and the small house was fixed to be the office. And I had Hope Lopez and other volunteers helping me. We had a dispatch card for each worker who had been working at the company, which was Christian Brothers. The company would call me, and let me know that they needed the workers at a certain day. And we'd go through this file, and call the first workers, the ones that had the most seniority.

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AD: What were some of the biggest obstacles you faced at the beginning?

JD: It was difficult when the growers would come out and counter-picket us and call us names. I remember having a hard time with the Japanese growers. They called themselves Nisei growers, which later became an association that represented growers, small farmers in Fresno County. And I would tell them, "You don't know what you're doing, because these big growers are eating you up. And you're losing a lot of your land. And we're in the same boat."

AD: Were you trying to organize the smaller growers?

JD: Well, we had nothing against them; we wanted them on our side. But they refused; they were against the union ... I testified at some of the hearings, such as one regarding minimum wage for women. Many of the small growers' associations were there, saying they couldn't afford higher wages for women, because they would lose their farms, they would go broke. And the minimum wage was passed and they didn't lose their farms. For restrooms out in the fields, and clean, cold drinking water, they said, "We can't afford it." Because it was too expensive for them to have portable toilets out in the fields, and hand-washing facilities, and individual drinking cups. They said they didn't have the money for that. But when we finally put enough pressure on them to put those things in the fields, the growers didn't go broke.

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JD: Cesar always encouraged us to get involved. He said that if we wanted to be heard, we had to register and vote. I had never voted. I had never registered to vote. So I voted for the first time for Robert Kennedy, during his campaign, and I became a registrar. And I

went all over registering people to vote. I was there when Kennedy came to Delano. He joined the pickets with us. He had a big rally, at the park in Delano...

It was because of Cesar encouraging us to get involved in our community that I began to work as a teacher. The government had a program where you work teaching farmworkers English. So I became a teacher, teaching farmworkers how to go shopping for clothes, and how to ask how much they were going to be paid for a new job, and how to communicate at the doctor's office. I even had my own TV program in Clovis, Channel 53. I had a half-hour, teaching farmworkers there on the screen. And I had to attend teachers' training. My husband would bring me from Parlier all the way to Fresno so I could attend a teacher-training program on Saturdays.

I remember one time at the training they gave us this little portable phonograph with a record on it, to use for teaching. The record had things on it like, "The grandfather frog said, 'Croak.'" And I said, "How can I teach that to farmworkers? They need to know how much they're going to get paid on the job, how to go to the store and buy a shirt and how much it's going to cost. Or where they can see a doctor. That's what they need to learn." So they said, "Okay, you teach your way."

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JD: I remember later, in the early 1970s, I formed a group and we picketed the Border Patrol. We picketed them because they were letting the growers bus in scabs from the border, in brand-new chartered buses, to break our strike.

I'd been to the Border Patrol's Fresno office a few times, but they told me that they had orders from Washington not to interfere where there was a labor dispute. So I went to my house and I called Washington, D.C. I called the office of Bernie Sisk, who represented us here in Fresno, and I talked to his aide. I told him that Border Patrol had told me they couldn't interfere, and he said, "That's not true. If there's a report, they should go out there."

So when they refused to go, I got together a group of people and we organized a picket against them. I called farmworkers, I called teachers, and I called the media, and I told them we were going to be picketing the Border Patrol because they were not doing the job that they were supposed to do.

The Border Patrol took off right away as soon as we arrived at their office, and by the time I got to the field there were just a few hands left. Almost all of the workers had left. Then I saw the Fresno agent from the Border Patrol coming out to talk to me. By that time, he knew my first name. He said, "Jessie, there's no undocumented workers here." And I said, "Well, Mr. Broderick." (I believe that was his name), "nobody knew you were coming, except me and you. And I certainly didn't call the grower about it. So who did? Because just before you arrived, cars took all the workers except for a handful."

So I told him, “Well, tomorrow at 6 a.m., I want you at this crossroads” and I told him to be at a specific intersection in Reedley, where I knew they would be driving through with the scabs. And I said to him, “You stop those cars and you find those workers that are out there.”

So the next morning when I went out to the field, to this crossroads in Reedley, there were all these workers lined up, sitting down beside the road. They were undocumented. And I cried and I told them, “We kept talking to you for three whole days to walk out. You could have gone to work somewhere else but you refused. These growers are pitting one group of poor people against another group of poor people. And if you allow yourselves to be used as strikebreakers there’s nothing we can do to help you.” I was crying, because I felt they were our own people and I hated to do have to this, but I had to.

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JD: I can still feel the short-handled hoe in my back. We called it *el brazo del diablo*, the devil’s arm. I used the short-handled hoe on crops like sugar beets and lettuce, in the Five Points area here in Fresno County. Even now, my back still hurts; I have to sit slanted.

So when there were hearings to ban the short-handed hoe, I testified here in Fresno. I took a short-handled hoe and a long-handled hoe with me and I demonstrated how we could do just as good a job with a long-handled hoe and it wouldn’t be so bad on our backs. I told the people from Washington and Sacramento to hold onto the tips of their shoes and walk up and down that room and see how long they could stand it. I asked them to imagine working eight or 10 hours with a short-handled hoe like that—to just think about how it felt. Well, they didn’t try walking up and down the room like that, but I think they got the point. So we got it banned for the second time. It had been banned once already, but the growers wanted to use it again.

AD: What were the most important things that you wanted to see change?

JD: I didn’t want any more pesticides out in the fields. And I didn’t want children to work out in the fields. I also testified against that. Because, see, here in Fresno, there was this grower who had a big plot of chili peppers planted on the city’s outskirts. And he would announce through the radio and TV that he needed 200 workers to work.

They would come. They’d pack their lunch, and they’d drive all the way out there to where the field was. They would bring their children. And they would get out there and just work about a half an hour, after which all the crops would be picked, because there were so many people picking. They picked for so short a time that they didn’t even earn enough for gas or the lunch. And the children would be playing near the cars. The cars were parked beside the road where there was lots of traffic. And I could see some of the children almost being run over.

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AD: What about the boycotts?

JD: We boycotted mainly supermarkets. We picketed. I remember picketing a Safeway store in Fresno. We were boycotting grapes, and asking everyone not to shop there because they were selling grapes. And three young men, Anglos with black pants, white shirts, and black ties, came over to where we were. They were eating grapes. They had bunches of grapes in their hands and they were eating them and throwing some at us. And they were calling us communists. Well, we just kept on with, "Viva Cesar Chavez," "Boycott Grapes," and "Boycott Safeway, don't buy here." You know, the things that we always said on the picket line. Then one of the young men motioned for me to walk up to where he was. I didn't pay him any attention when he did that, so then he walked over to me and asked me, "How do you say communist in Spanish?" And I said, "Let me think, let me think ... you say, '*Ustedes ganarán.*'" So then all three of the men started chanting, "*Ustedes ganarán, ustedes ganarán, ustedes ganarán!*" They didn't know Spanish so they didn't know they were saying, "You will win! You will win! You will win!" And I thought that was funny. Everybody did and we were all laughing.

Another time we were picketing at a winery in Clovis, and along came a constable. There were about 15 of us, going around in circles right in front of the winery. The constable had a big stack of papers with him. He tried to give the papers to me and I wouldn't take them. He said, "Who represents you?" I said, "Nobody. I represent myself." So then he asked, "Who represents these people?" And I said, "Nobody, they just represent themselves." He tried to give me the papers again but I wouldn't take them so then he turned to a little girl. This little girl must have been about eight or nine years old. He said, "What's that woman's name?" And she said, "Well, you were talking to her, why don't you ask her." And I said to him, "Well, we teach them young." With that, he threw his bunch of papers at my feet. So I told him, "Hey, you know you're littering and that's against the law." That was the last straw. He took off! He got so angry he finally left!

Many things happened, good and bad. Whenever we heard another union contract had been signed, we were all just happy. "Hey, we made another one!" we said.

AD: What did you think about Cesar's fasts?

JD: When he was fasting, it made all of us real sad. Because we knew it was his health. We had people coming in from all over, from all parts of the country, from other states. That encouraged us to keep on doing what we were doing. Because we knew we had the support of other people. There were religious people; there were all nationalities out there with us.

Cesar went through quite a few fasts. We were always there. We would go and join all the people. One time there were even tents put up where we spent the night. Praying for him and for all farmworkers, for justice.

AD: When did you and Grandpa start farming with the other families?

JD: That was in the early 1970s. We had heard about the reclamation law, where the big corporate growers were supposed to sell excess land to smaller farmers in the Westlands, which is the western part of Fresno County. And we had a group. We had lots of families holding meetings in Raisin City. I was talking to them about the law, which said you could buy 160 acres to farm. And a lot of people were interested. So then George Ballis came along and we formed the National Land for People. And we tried to buy some of that land. I was asked to go to talk to one of the big cotton growers who owned a lot of land in the Westlands, around the Huron area. And I told him that we had a group of farmworkers who wanted to buy some of the land that was for sale. And he looked at me, and he said, "Do you have half a million dollars down payment?"

And I said, "Mr. Giffen, we've worked your land for over 15 years and the highest we were paid was 75 cents an hour. After working ten hours, and after deductions, we went home with seven dollars and 35 cents for 10 hours of work. I measured your land with a hoe, inch by inch, working your land. How can we have half a million dollars for a down payment?" So we didn't get any land. The growers transferred this land, in name only, to individuals who were paid for the use of their names. We called them paper farmers.

But then there was a man who heard me speak to a group of farmworkers there by the courthouse. I was talking to people about buying some of that land that had been denied to us. That we needed to enforce the 1902 law. This man heard me talk, and after I finished he walked up to me, asked my name, and said that he was interested in what I was saying. That he believed the same thing. So we started having meetings at his farm in Raisin City. And then he offered part of his ranch so we could grow crops, and said that all we had to pay for was water.

So there were six families farming six acres of land. We started by growing cherry tomatoes. We planted the plants. We weeded. We irrigated. We did everything that it takes to grow a tomato crop. And it was a very good year. Nobody had ever sold cherry tomatoes in our area. So our tomatoes were in demand.

We had a middleman who would come out there. He would say, "You better hurry up and pack 200 boxes of tomatoes because we need to ship them to New York." So we worked until dark packing these tomatoes to be flown to New York. After that, we made the news. "Small Farmers Can Make It on Small Acreage." But this was not in the Westlands. So then the grape growers heard about us, they started planting cherry tomatoes on a little piece of land left over.

By the third year, there was an overproduction of cherry tomatoes in Fresno. So the price went so low we could no longer even afford the boxes that we packed the tomatoes in. By this time, my sons had their own jobs, and their kids went to school. It was just my husband and myself. But we managed with the help, part time, from my sons and my daughters and my grandsons and granddaughters and everybody pitching in. We still managed for one more year. Then we decided to sell because my husband wasn't feeling very well. We sold our land to another family that was farming.

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JD: I used to travel a lot. In 1972 I was named a delegate to the Democratic Convention in Florida. That's the first time I ever went out of state. I didn't fly. I went with friends, one of whom had a car. They were on vacation. One of them was a delegate, and the other two were alternates. We were four women traveling together. Going throughout the states all the way to Florida.

AD: What were your impressions of the convention?

JD: I remember mostly George Wallace, the Republican senator, out there with lettuce on his hat and lettuce all over the floor. He and his group were throwing lettuce around because we were boycotting lettuce.

I remember that they gave us this box of food for lunch and we decided that we would give this food to the people who were outside demonstrating. They'd been there for days. They couldn't get into the convention but they were out there supporting us. What they called hippies and farmworkers and everybody that could make it out there to the convention. We gave our food to them.

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JD: One time we went to Mills College with a group of farmworkers. We were leafletting in San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley—all over. It had been arranged for us to stay at churches or private homes. But there was a group of us who had no place to stay. So someone went to talk to Mills College, to see if they could let us spend the night there. And they said, "No. No men are allowed here. We're a women's college." But there was this Black Panther leader. She said, "Wait a minute. I'll take care of it." She went inside, and we all waited there in the lobby, or the entrance. And she came back and said, "Okay, the men can stay with their wives." So there was another big one for us. The Black Panthers got them to let us stay with our husbands there at the college, where only women were allowed.

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JD: I remember when they passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and we were so happy that for once we were being heard and justice would be done. But it didn't turn out that way after Deukmejian was elected. Instead of people who were equally representing the farmworkers and the growers, it was a one-sided thing where all of them were Republicans and they were against the union. They were in favor of the growers who gave a lot of money to them for their campaigns. The main one was Sterling. He was a really bad one.

So we felt defeated, but we didn't give up. We still kept struggling and fighting for a union.

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JD: The year before Cesar died, I volunteered full-time with the UFW. I went to Forty Acres in Delano, and I used to cook and pack lunches for those who were out leafleting and talking to people about the union. I used to get up real early in the morning. From there, I was sent to Parlier for a few weeks. And then I was sent to Coachella. It was hot. We'd get up at about 2:30 or 3 in the morning, take a shower, and get ready and go out to the office for instructions on where each group was to be sent. We would picket out there and talk to people about the union. Some would walk out and join us. We had banners for them when they joined our pickets.

When I was sent to La Paz, I answered the telephone and took messages for Cesar, whose office was right next to where I was. I was working with Cecilia Ruiz, Elvia Macias, and Elojia Vedoya. We became very close friends. And for my birthday, Cesar had a party for me. It was very nice. He gave me a Bible that he signed, and Cecilia Ruiz signed it too. I still have that Bible.

When I returned to Kingsburg, I stayed there for a few weeks and then I moved to Fresno. I was living in a trailer home on Tulare Street, just off Clovis. And then my trailer burned and I lost a collection of buttons and papers and pictures and things that I had about the union—almost 30 years of things that I had kept. But I still was working for the United Farm Workers. For two consecutive years I received calls from La Paz asking me to ask for donations for food for the convention, which was being held in Fresno at the Convention Center. There were so many supporters and members who brought in food for the conventions. Volunteers would help with the serving.

But it was before that, when I'd gone back to Kingsburg, at the ranch, that Hope Lopez called me. She said that her son had told her that he heard on the news that Cesar Chavez had died. I called the Delano office, but there was no answer. At La Paz there was no answer. At Radio Campesina there was no answer. So I turned on the radio. I felt as if a bucket of ice-cold water had been poured over me and I started crying. I felt like a member of our family had died because he treated us as family.

Cesar Chavez, a great leader, gave his life for us, and he will always be in our hearts and in our memory. His whole family too.

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JD: People have asked me, “Were you ever scared? Out there on the pickets, everything...”
And I’ve thought about it, and I think, no, I was never scared.