

Obdulia “Abby” Flores Rivera 1965-1970, 1972-1979, 1986

Remembering the Huelga

We were strikers, not volunteers. We became strikers in 1965 when my father walked out of the Mid-State Ranch fields, about 10 miles east of Delano near Richgrove where we were living. He was working at the same ranch as Philip Veracruz, who later became vice president of the United Farm Workers union. Philip also lived across the street from us. He and my father had many discussions about unions, history, and life in general. I did not learn this from my father. It was Philip who told me years later. Philip was Filipino and they were the ones who first went on strike with Larry Itliong, followed by the mostly Mexican farmworkers under Cesar.

At first our union was called NFWA (National Farm Workers Association). In August 1966 at Filipino Hall, we voted to change the name to UFWOC (United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO). I recall Cesar telling us that we were going to be part of the AFL-CIO. He told us that he had never wanted that for us. He wanted us to remain independent and not beholden to anyone, but the strike was taking its toll on us and we needed help. Later still, we changed the name to UFWA (United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO).

Before going on strike, my father attended house meetings. I remember him opening the screen door to receive a flyer offered by a boy no older than 10. Our family did not march to Sacramento because we were Baptist. My father did not want to march with the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe at the forefront, nor did he want to be present at daily masses. We participated in pickets in the fields and later at grocery stores, but my father never participated in vigils nor did he attend the masses even when Cesar fasted. He absolutely respected and admired Cesar for taking the bold step of starting a union for farmworkers, however. He always prayed for him and his family. There were other farmworkers of various denominations who did not join the march to Sacramento in March of 1966 for the same reason. Otherwise, there would have been even more marchers present. I also knew Catholic families who did not like the union marching with the Virgin of Guadalupe banner and were angry with Cesar. Personally, I think it was a good thing Cesar did this because it gave him and workers who shared the same religious beliefs a common bond and the strength needed in our struggle for a union.

My father never discussed his plans to go on strike with us. It took us a while to figure out what was going on. One day my 19-year-old brother, Enoch, was caught offguard. He was working at a cold storage for Caratan when a foreman came and told him to get in the truck. He had a rifle across the truck floor. He drove with my brother to a field where the union pickets were calling on workers to leave the fields and join the strike. When my brother asked the foreman what he planned to do, the foreman said that if anybody trespassed onto the property he was going to shoot them. My brother was upset because he

recognized the strikers and many were family friends from Richgrove. He sat there waiting, and decided that if the foreman raised the rifle he would tackle him. After that day, my brother quit working at Caratan and never went back. He was drafted into the U.S. Army so he did not participate in the strike activities like the rest of us.

Before daybreak, my father would drive us to the entrance of Schenley Vineyards to take down license plate numbers of company trucks or other vehicles coming in or out of the property, to talk to workers, or to discover any unusual activity. Our first union contract was with Schenley Vineyards. The majority of the workers and most of the ranch committee were from Richgrove. We also picketed daily at many other ranches, including Guimarra, where my stepmother had worked, and at DiGiorgio, where we won an election in August of 1966. Then the grape boycott started. Our family did not go, but it was not easy for those who stayed behind either. We would pass strikers on the school bus in the morning where my father and a few others stood picketing in front of Caratan's cold storage. When we passed by again at the end of our school day, they were still standing there. My dad would not get home until dark. They picketed outside 12 to 14 hours a day--in cold, rain, and fog or in 100°-plus weather--until contracts were signed with the table grape growers.

It was difficult being strikers. We were dependent on food donations and it was not easy to prepare meals from the odds and ends of canned and dry foods we received each week. It was frustrating for us and a real struggle to prepare a decent meal. We rarely had fresh meat, fruits, or vegetables. Cesar had a kitchen set up for us to eat at lunchtime and that was the only good meal we got for the day. At first, we would go to the kitchen next to a Quonset hut, (my family gave the meeting place the name Quonset Hut), located off Garces Avenue in the western outskirts of Delano. These were memorable times for me. After lunch, we would have a quick meeting and sing, and the Teatro Campesino would entertain us with skits. We would rest a while before heading back to the picket lines in the fields. Later, the meals were served at the Filipino Hall on Ellington where we also had regular Friday night union meetings.

One day my sister and I sat in the bleacher area near the Quonset Hut listening to Cesar before heading out to the picket lines. Afterward we went to wait next to our father, who was talking to Cesar. Cesar was surprised to learn we were his daughters. He said to my father, "These are your daughters?" Turning to us he asked, "This is your father? I thought you were students." In a way it was not good that he learned this because from that moment forward Cesar took care of us as though he knew what my father would find acceptable. Throughout my years with the union, Cesar would say he would not assign me to do this or that because my dad would not approve. I thought it was funny because he always told me this in a humorous way. I thought Cesar just did not believe I could cut the mustard. Then, 12 years later, when I was 28 years old, my father came to La Paz in Keene, the union headquarters, to help me move out of my house. I had been sharing it in dormitory fashion with two young men but that did not matter to my father, who was angered by this arrangement. He said he could not believe that Cesar would allow men and women to share a house and that he was going to have a talk with him. It was at that

moment that I realized how Cesar understood my father all too well. It was not Cesar's decision that I live there, yet my father had blamed him.

My sister, Alma, worked for the Robert F. Kennedy Medical Plan. LeRoy Chatfield was the director of the medical plan at the time. She had good office skills and enjoyed working there. She also went to various meetings with LeRoy and Cesar when they presented the plan to farmworkers. She went by bus one time to meet Cesar and LeRoy in Salinas and had a tough time getting there because Greyhound strikers had a set up a picket line and she did not want to cross. Eventually she did because she was stranded in the middle of nowhere, but she felt miserable. She returned in a car caravan that included a station wagon in which Cesar was traveling resting on a mattress. Months before, he had fasted for 25 days and was still in delicate health. They stopped at a park in Los Banos and crossed the street with some of the caravan riders to get something to eat at a hamburger stand. She remembers the day well, July 20, 1969, because the television was showing footage of the astronauts walking on the moon.

I helped answer phones for a short time at the Pink House, the first union office, for Cesar's secretary. Cesar was the one who taught me how to answer the multi-line phone. I was a scared kid and he made me feel valuable and that any work I did was appreciated. He always had a way of making a person feel that you could learn to do anything. Later, I worked with Helen Chavez, Cesar's wife, in the Farm Workers Credit Union (FWCU). A childhood friend of mine, Idalia Escamilla, also a daughter of farmworkers, worked in the union's legal department. She thought I might be able to help at the credit union so she introduced me to Helen. Helen taught me everything about bookkeeping and the credit union. Soon I was helping with share deposits and withdrawals, loan processing, and keeping books. I worked in the FWCU office for most of my many years with the union, although I also worked in the accounting and data processing departments. One summer, for a few months, I worked in the grape boycott in Spokane, Washington.

In 1969, I attended a few negotiation sessions to take notes for Cesar. He spoke with power and authority when he met at the table with growers. He spoke for all of us who for so long had no voice. He was there to make sure we were heard. That was an epiphany moment for me on how everything we were doing out on the strike lines and boycott was making it possible for us to sit at the table and be heard. When we signed the contract in 1970 with the table grape growers, it was a great moment for my family. Cesar had prepared us for this day. He said that many will come after the plate is served. "Muchos vendrán después que el plato está servido." He told us we would have to accept them as brothers and sisters. That was difficult for us. Many farmworkers thought we should put the scabs at the bottom of the seniority list or not give them jobs at all. Cesar said we would treat them as though they had been with us all along because it was not their fault they had been fearful for their jobs or had been unable to sacrifice as we had.

Cesar stated on many occasions that he picked Delano to begin organizing farmworkers because his wife Helen wanted to be near her family. This makes sense to me because during the hard strike years we received help from our family to pull us through difficult

times. The union paid our rent and utilities from the strike fund, while our food and some clothing came from donations. That is why my brothers from San Jose and Porterville, Saul and Noe, and their wives, Arcelia and Emma, respectively, helped fill the gap. We needed clothes, food, and money and they helped us even as they strained to provide for their own families. My brother Enoch gave money to my dad while he was in Vietnam, as did my other brother, Enos, who was also in the Army. When you think of the life of farmworkers, we usually struggle anyway. This way of surviving was just a bit unusual, but we were not alone. It was a difficult time for all strikers, including Cesar and his family.

We were considered strikers not volunteers because we were farmworkers who went out on strike at the beginning of the organizing drive. Many came to help us as volunteers from the beginning of our efforts. When the table growers signed contracts with us, all the staff became known as volunteers because we were not getting paid a regular salary. We continued receiving \$5 per week. Countless volunteers worked with us from the beginning, and others continued coming throughout the years, always contributing their skills and talents.

Contrary to what people say or write, Cesar and his family received the same amount of money as the rest of us. I saw his checks. He got \$5 per week. He lived in a simple home, not a mansion. I visited his home in Delano and in La Paz many times. The Chavez family got their clothes from the same place we all did, the donation bin. In 1977, Cesar had a meeting with volunteer staff at La Paz, our headquarters location, to tell us we were all getting a 100 percent raise in salary. We all cheered and celebrated. We would now receive \$10 per week for working six days a week from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., sometimes longer. We also received \$5 per week gas reimbursement.

The Farmworkers Credit Union was moved from Delano to La Paz in August of 1975, making it necessary for me to move, too. La Paz is the shortened name for Nuestra Señora de la Paz (Our Lady of Peace) and the site of the union headquarters. It was formerly a tuberculosis hospital and is located in Keene off Highway 58 East in the mountains, 30 miles east of Bakersfield. A year after arriving at La Paz, Cesar asked me to head the accounting office. During the day, I worked at the accounting office. From 6:00 p.m. until midnight, I would do the accounting for the credit union to help out the staff in training. This lasted about a month.

The work in the accounting department was at times overwhelming. Many times I felt I was not equipped to do the work. It was a great responsibility, and changes out in the field, e.g., an initiative, new organizing campaigns, or a political election, could create upheavals in the accounting office. We had to move quickly to accommodate these changes. Although it could be stressful, it was exciting and challenging. Staff would come to La Paz from the field office for planning meetings, training sessions, and conferences. Everyone worked hard at their jobs, but the volume of work was incredible. I truly believe many of us actually did the work of three or four people in a similar job in the normal, income-earning world.

During my time in the accounting department, we transferred the books of the various entities to a new computer system. We were fortunate to have Sister Florence Zweber join us at this time. Sister Florence was a retired nurse and a financial management expert. She was not the first management person to come and give a hand, but the simplicity of the system she put into place was a perfect fit for our needs at the time. Cesar found a great person when he discovered Sister Florence. She worked diligently and methodically putting our new system together. She also conducted management training for all volunteer staff. Sister Florence was a godsend whose talents were immensely appreciated. Sadly, she was killed in a car accident on her way to Tehachapi. She was a good friend and well loved by all.

The patient wings of the former hospital at La Paz were used as dorms to house single volunteer staff or couples without children, while trailers housed married couples with children. A few of the small homes or duplexes had been assigned early on when the first few families moved to La Paz. When accommodations eventually thinned out, the union rented several small homes in Keene. Before the trailers were purchased, families had also lived in the hospital wings. About three of the dorm rooms morphed into kitchens. Whoever wanted could join a kitchen. Everyone divided the responsibility of cooking, splitting the cost for food, cleaning up, etc. Because of the hours I worked, it was more convenient for me to use a hot plate and a toaster oven in my room so that I could get some rest or be out doing other things, so I did not join a kitchen.

Throughout the years Cesar and other staff would tell us stories of how difficult life was for those working out in the boycott. Those volunteers had it rough. However, life at La Paz was difficult, too. We lived in an isolated community in the mountains. Our work hours were long and the nearest town was 10 miles away. During my three years at La Paz, there may have been approximately 125 to 150 people living there. This number does not include the many children who lived there. We had few opportunities to get out and do other things after work. During our day off it was difficult to get away, especially if one did not own a car. Nevertheless, we were young and managed to create our own fun.

Life could become monotonous doing the same thing day after day. Our work hours were long. Then someone would make the suggestion and we would jump into a union car and go into Tehachapi for a slice of homemade pie or into Bakersfield to see a movie or to walk around the mall. We also borrowed union cars to go into town to buy groceries. That offered a nice break from the daily routine. A trip into town was always fun. In the evenings at La Paz, we would sit around and visit or hang outside the dorms to talk, play cards, read, and listen to music. Some friends who lived in one of the hospital wings created an outside patio lounge area out of an odd assortment of sofas and armchairs for us to hang out. It was one of my favorite places to visit.

Other ways we enjoyed our life at La Paz was by celebrating birthdays and holidays, and dancing late into the night. Most volunteer training conferences ended with a community meal at "The Kitchen" (it had been the hospital kitchen when the compound was constructed) and dancing either there or at the North Unit. The North Unit was another

wing of hospital buildings that had accommodated children treated for tuberculosis in the past. It was about half a mile south of the dormitory wings and administrative offices. The staff received excellent training at the North Unit on contract administration, organizing, boycott strategy, and office management to help run the field office effectively. Aside from these training sessions, the North Unit was also used for weddings, receptions, and dances, and it also housed the Fred Ross School of Collective Bargaining, which Cesar founded to train contract negotiators.

A room in one of the houses in La Paz became vacant. This house, nicknamed "The Bachelor Pad," housed one volunteer who worked in the accounting department and two auto mechanics who usually worked out on the road during the week. One of the mechanics eventually found other housing outside of La Paz and my bid to move in was granted. I cannot recall how the bidding process worked. All I remember is that I had bid on other places before and had not gotten them. This is the housing my father came to help move me from when I left La Paz. It had four bedrooms--one at each corner--with doors opening into the kitchen area. It had a stove and kitchen sink. Cooking was much more fun, easier, and faster. To the back of the kitchen was the bathroom. We were allowed to turn one of the rooms into a television room and people would come to watch *M.A.S.H.*, *Dallas*, and *Saturday Night Live*. Often we simply sat on the front porch with friends. Wonderful memories were made in my little home. There is no way my father could have understood my good fortune to be living in that house. I did not have to wait in long lines to bathe, allowing me to sleep in a little longer every morning.

We often had community meals or picnics. Many volunteers did not know that whenever Helen Chavez invited the community to bring their own piece of meat to a barbecue, saying that she would provide the rest, she was really using her own resources to round out the meal. I truly believe people thought she just had the extra food. Many times she saved to buy the potatoes and beans for the wonderful potato salad and chili beans she prepared. Helen always made a point of saying that just because we were farmworkers did not mean we did not enjoy good food. As a matter of fact, the first day I met Helen she had gotten three or four of the farmworker women at the office to chip in some money to buy fresh shrimp. The Pink House smelled fishy as she boiled the shrimp for a salad. A volunteer walked in and was shocked that anyone could afford shrimp. Helen told him there would not be much for each but it would be mighty good. That is when I first heard her say that just because we are farmworkers and poor does not mean we don't know how to enjoy a good steak or know how to eat well. The volunteer got a kick out of it, and so did I because it was true. Later, it was even more amusing to me because Cesar was a vegetarian but could never get Helen to become one, though he tried persuading her every chance he got.

Cesar was a great teacher to me, but Helen was my mentor. Cesar always put us to work in areas where expectations were high but his confidence in us to do the job was greater. The work that needed to be done would be for the good of our union--our brothers and sisters. Helen helped me through rough times by being an example of how to give, how to sacrifice, and how to remain steadfast. I was fortunate to work with her for many years and

consider it the best training I have ever received because it benefited not only my work, but also my personal life.

To this day I remember Helen fondly, especially at Christmastime. She always tried to get a little gift for each of her children and grandchildren. I remember how she would save to buy two packages of undershirts and underwear. From these, she would make separate sets to give to each one of her young granddaughters as a Christmas present from her and Cesar. It was a tradition for her to make a huge pot of tamales and have her family come enjoy the holidays together at her home. No matter what small gift each child received, it was heartwarming to see each gift acknowledged with much fanfare and appreciation. Helen is still truly amazing and the most considerate person I have ever known.

In 1977, Cesar approached us with the idea of implementing a “padrino” system in which all new arrivals to La Paz would be matched to “godparents.” We voted to adopt it and one of the first to try our new system was Jorge Rivera, a farmworker from San Diego. He worked in security and was Cesar’s bodyguard. Even though I was not Jorge’s madrina, we met, dated, and got married on January 20, 1979. We had our wedding at the North Unit. Many couples got married there and the celebrations were always big affairs with hundreds of volunteers attending. Our wedding was no different. After our wedding, we left La Paz and set up our first home in San Ysidro. My husband worked at the San Ysidro field office as a contract negotiator. He had been selected by Cesar to be trained at the Fred Ross School of Collective Bargaining in La Paz. We are still married and my husband still works for the union as a negotiator.

Many volunteers came and went in La Paz. Some left on their own, while others were kicked out. This happened to some because they did not work. By this I mean they literally stayed in their rooms or slacked to the point of not doing a thing all day. Others were told to leave because they were vocal in their disagreement on how things were being run in La Paz or throughout the union for that matter.

I can speak only for what I observed at La Paz. Business and personal mail at La Paz was received, sorted, and distributed by the mailroom once after it had been picked up from the post office. Some correspondence to individuals was really business correspondence for a specific department. Some of the mail was being forwarded out of La Paz or sitting in someone’s inbox until he or she returned from being out on the road. Some of the correspondence contained checks for specific departments, but there was no way of knowing. It was causing delays and problems because the proper people were not immediately receiving the correspondence. This had also been a problem for me during my transfer from the credit union to the accounting department. Because some of the members knew me by name, some envelopes would come addressed to me with checks for the credit union. It was a problem that needed to be addressed. The mailroom met with Cesar and it was decided that all mail would be opened. We had a community meeting and Cesar explained the problem and told us to advise our loved ones and friends that if they wrote to us they should write “personal” on the outside of the envelope. Otherwise, all mail would be opened by the mailroom. Well, this announcement created a furor that

reverberated for weeks with unpleasant consequences. We hashed it out back and forth at that meeting, then at other meetings. It was horrible. Some said it was an invasion of privacy, some said it was all a hoax to read our mail, and so on and so forth. Some volunteers used the meeting to air out other complaints and grievances. It was crazy. Some individuals were kicked out of La Paz at these meetings. They were told to leave, now!

There were many hurt volunteers who should have left on their own accord because they were unhappy to begin with, and it only convinced me that they chose this opportunity to raise a little hell before leaving. Just because one volunteered and lived at the work site with other staff did not give one the right to decide how the union business should be handled. I understand that it was awkward because we lived where we worked, but some people got real angry with Cesar, who did not deserve the blame. I go over and over this in my head, trying to determine how the issue could have been resolved. It seems to me that from the beginning we took a position on the issue and no one was willing to change, including me.

Some volunteers left La Paz because they were reassigned to work in the lettuce boycott, or at a field office. Some went to work for other unions, returned home, went back to school, left because of illness, burnout from the long hours of work and isolation, or because it was hard to work for so little money. There is a Mexican proverb that says, "Cada cabeza es un mundo." Loosely translated, it means "Each person is unique." Everyone had his or her individual reason. There really was no consistent pattern to people leaving. The only constant was that while some left, others always came to volunteer.

There were 10 of us in my family during the strike years, including my parents. My father, Luis P. Flores, was one of many who sacrificed to make a better life for all farmworkers. It is satisfying to know that we now have laws to protect farmworkers, and that they also receive unemployment benefits, especially during those rough winter months. Under contract, farmworkers have many protections as well as a medical plan, a pension plan, vacation pay, and much more. Cesar said, "When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us, so it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving life do we find life, that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice."

The battle for unionization is still very real today. There are thousands of people who, like our former volunteers, actively support the union in numerous ways and are making a difference in the lives of farmworkers. The union needs their continued support. Many children of former strikers and farmworker members also work for the union today. They are hard at work making certain that contracts are being implemented correctly, and that workers know they have a strong, solid union protecting them so conditions will never go back to what they were in the past. I am pleased to see my own son working for the UFWA alongside the sons and daughters of my friends from La Paz and Delano. It is always good to hear from fellow volunteers from the past who have never stopped in their efforts to help bring justice to the fields. Viva la Huelga! Viva Cesar Chavez! Viva La Union de Trabajadores Campesinos!