

Hope Lopez Fierro 1966–1974

Speaking to Strangers

In my developing years, it was burned into my brain by a very strict mother that I should never speak to strangers. She also made it very plain that in our family, one does not ask for money.

1966. It was easy for me to volunteer my services to help out the farmworkers, until I learned that my volunteer efforts would include speaking to and asking total strangers for money. Other than that I enjoyed every minute.

I volunteered to help out just at the time that the farmworkers had set up an office on G Street in Fresno. The makeshift sign read “National Farmworkers Association — NFWA.” Cresencio Mendoza was the regional organizer in charge of coordinating efforts. He was a workaholic who kept going day and night and was not known to take breaks. I signed up the workers who came into the office, or escorted them to the labor commissioner’s office or to other English-speaking agencies.

The Fresno office covered the Fresno-Madera part of the San Joaquin Valley. Meetings were set up in the office. Later Cresencio and I ventured out to do night house meetings in Parlier, Selma, Orosi, Woodlake, San Joaquin, Five Points, and Madera. I had a little 1955 Thunderbird that traveled the many miles, stopping at fields and orchards of the valley. The farmworkers called it the “Huelga Bird.”

We visited the workers in the farm labor camps in Mendota, Firebaugh, Kingsburg, and Del Rey to talk to them about the union. All of them signed up. During the day we talked to the workers out in the fields or under the trees during their lunchtime. They all signed membership cards and/or paid their dues. The dues were \$2 a month. Workers were making anywhere from 90 cents to \$1 an hour. Sun up until sun down, seven days a week during the harvest season.

Well into the night, we kept the midnight oil burning in the office, typing up statements, writing letters, collecting dues, signing up members who came in after work from all over the valley. Most of them seemed anxious to carry that little yellow membership card that symbolized a new-found power; a voice in their own language. The office sign was changed to “United Farmworkers Organizing Committee — AFL-CIO — UFWOC.”

We organized picket lines at Safeway and Mayfair stores. The Spanish-speaking community, including local Chicano business people, all volunteered to walk the line during their lunch hours. The signs read “Don’t Shop at Safeway or Mayfair.” We did this until we were zapped with being in violation of the secondary boycott, which states that one cannot picket or boycott a store that sells a scab product. In our case the product was table grapes. We just changed the message on our picket signs. Instead of signs that read “This store

sells scab grapes,” they now said “Don’t Buy Grapes.” This went on until Cesar taught the California legislature a few things about labor laws. The secondary boycott, a ruling by the National Labor Relations Act, referred to all workers, industrial and commercial. Cesar demanded that the farmworkers continue to boycott without interference since the NLRA does not cover farmworkers.

The whole organizing situation was a daily learning experience. The farmworkers learned to cuss in English from the student volunteers, and the volunteers learned to get up in the morning, before the sun was up.

In 1968, Richard and Manuel Chavez came to my house and asked me if I would help out on the grape boycott. Reinforcements were needed in the East. My mission, if I were to accept, was the city of Philadelphia. What did the boycott entail? Just speaking to a lot of strangers and asking them for money.

Many months passed before a caravan of new boycotters, including me and my two sons Val and David, headed East to stop the sale of table grapes of California. I didn’t have a clue how that was going to happen. I was sweating blood all the way to the Eastern seaboard.

Magdaleno Botello was the person delegated to be my co-pilot and help me drive the Huelga Bird across the miles. He was to be assigned to help out in New York.

The Boycott

The people in the East were just as anxious to help out the farmworkers as the farmworkers had been to sign up as members. They were all very friendly. After all, Philadelphia is known as the “City of Brotherly Love.” And it is. A committee had already been established by previous boycotters. They called themselves the “Friends of the Farmworkers.” And they were.

Two of the boycotters who had been assigned to work with me were huelgistas: Tonia Salgado, who had walked out of the conglomerate Giumarra ranch; and Carolina Franco, who had walked out of the Schenley ranch. (Schenley was to be one of the first growers to sign a contract with Cesar Chavez.) Both Tonia and Caro were from the Delano area and had been active in the movement since the onset. They were experts at speaking to strangers and asking for money.

At committee meetings, conferences, and conventions, we spoke to all groups: unions, teachers, women, men, students, and churches. We organized picket lines in the city and in the suburbs. The women in the suburbs were heavy-duty in the confrontation division. They were strong and determined, and hated the sight of table grapes on their local retail store shelves. The stores acquiesced to the customer.

In May of 1969, I volunteered to fast, and ended the fast eight days later when the selected

store, A & P, agreed to stop selling grapes in the city. Other chains in the city started taking their grapes off the shelves, except for Acme, the largest chain. Tonia Salgado and Octavia Fielder fasted for two weeks, trying to convince Acme to get rid of the grapes. Another boycotter, Wally Johnson, fasted for three weeks, but the chain wouldn't give in. Wally had to quit the fast under his doctor's orders.

Carolina Franco and Lilly Sprintz fasted against Food Fair. That chain also refused to fold. In the meantime, in California, the growers were beginning to sign contracts under pressure of the strikes in the fields, and the pressure of the boycott across the country and Canada.

In June of 1970, Sam Gould, the president of Acme, called me around 6 a.m. to inform me that Acme had just purchased a whole load of table grapes from California, and I would see a full-page ad in the local newspaper. "Mrs. Lopez, I want you to be the first to know. They are union grapes, picked by the members of your union. All the boxes have your union logo with the black eagle on them." I am not often left speechless, but that morning I sat there with my mouth wide open, not saying a word, the tears rolling into my open mouth. The telephone rang all day to inform us that Acme was selling grapes, and asking, "Is it true? Are they union grapes?"

In July of 1970, I wrote my letter of resignation and asked Cesar to be allowed to return to California. Number one, the grapes were coming off the shelves; number two, my kids were not doing very well in school; and number three, I was homesick as hell. I wanted to see a Mexican so badly, my eyes hurt.

Cesar called and told me that he was not going to accept my resignation, but that I could come home because he had other plans for me. I packed my little Huelga Bird and headed back to sunny California. The night I arrived in Delano, the farmworkers had just voted to start boycotting lettuce. Oh no!

Cesar placed me in charge of the hiring hall in Parlier. We tried enforcing the contracts, but the growers wanted to play games. More contracts were signed every day. Most of them were negotiated by Dolores Huerta, who bested the growers in every section and subsection of the contracts. The lettuce boycott initiated more strikes in Salinas.

In 1972 I went to Coachella to help Ray Huerta with the enforcement of the contracts. More hanky-panky. The growers signed contracts with the Teamsters before the UFW contracts had expired. The growers had the Teamster contracts but not the people.

The farmworkers walked out en masse from the grape fields of the Coachella Valley. There were many arrests, and much violence on the part of the Teamster goons, who were not even union members, just paid gorillas with beer keg bellies.

In 1973, strikes continued in Kern and Fresno counties and all through the valleys. The

union had a new headquarters up in the Tehachapi Mountains. Once an old sanitarium, it now housed farmworkers. Cesar named it La Paz. I was placed in charge of finding a room for the strikers. This was the year when I saw the most activity in La Paz. Strikers and boycotters were coming and going. They were tired but not ready to give up the cause. There was a lot of energy, cheer, and motivation late into the night. No one seemed able to sleep; they were too wound up.

In September of that year, I was assigned to help Jose Gomez coordinate the first farmworker convention. It was to take place in Fresno. Since that was my home base, I was the likely person to contact the unions and businesses that would be drafted into volunteering their services to make the convention a huge success. I didn't have the foggiest idea about putting together a convention. Thank God that Cesar did.

I ended up recruiting the troops to help out with catering the meals for more than 6000 delegates for the five days of the convention. It was a piece of cake. Everybody wanted to volunteer just to get on the convention floor. There were more volunteers than delegates and members.

The farmworkers were now part of the political system. It took tears, sacrifice, and deprivation, but they had obtained some modicum of justice. The daily learning continued for the farmworkers, the strikers, the boycotters, and for the American public in general.

It is unfortunate that too many of the original strikers and boycotters disappeared or died, along with tomes of history that made this specific cause so remarkable. Their cry for justice was "*Viva La Causa!*" Their mission was accomplished. Many died so that La Causa could live. Many more have died, but La Causa still lives.