

Karen Boutilier Kendall 1965–1972

My parents, Reverend Eugene and Luana Boutilier, worked with the Migrant Ministry and UFW from 1965 to 1972. My sister, Merrily, my cousin Mark Hernandez, and I were three, six, and five, respectively, when we first moved to Delano and became Huelgistas in 1966. The stories below are excerpts from my soon-to-be-published book, *Berkeley to Beijing*, which details our time with the UFW, our political activism, and my trip to China in 1973 with Shirley MacLaine.

Delano

Our first home in Delano was a strike house that served a multitude of purposes. One bedroom was our family's living quarters and another room housed the printing press for the Migrant Ministry's bilingual newspaper, *El Malcriado*. The other bedrooms and the living room were general sleeping areas for strike supporters. This was my first taste of communal living. The service porch had been converted to a darkroom for the union photographer. The porch was also his bedroom and housed a washer and dryer.

Luis Valdez's "El Teatro Campesino" rehearsed in the garage of the house. El Teatro Campesino was a group of Latino actors, singers, and some strikers who put on little plays or "playettes" during the Friday night rallies at Filipino Hall. We would watch the rehearsals as well as the actual performances. There was constant activity at the house.

Dad's job during his first three months with the Migrant Ministry was to create and run the student "Summer of Service" project. The idea was to recruit, train, and assign college students from all around the country to work for the farmworkers. Dad got support from a number of student and religious organizations. Dad recruited about 70 students who trained at Forty Acres. Forty Acres was the farmworker headquarters in Delano. In total, more than 150 students assisted the strike that summer. The training program Dad put together took place in an old abandoned ring with wooden bleachers that had been previously used for cockfights.

Jack London's daughter, Joan, who was almost 80 years old at the time, graciously volunteered to come and speak about the history of the farm labor movement. Students were assigned a variety of tasks that included picketing, leafleting, assisting with general organization or office administration, working in the credit union, the medical clinic, and assisting in the publishing of *El Malcriado*.

The focus for union activity was at Forty Acres. At that time, Forty Acres was a rundown farm center in the fields west of Delano that consisted of trailers, old warehouses, and barns converted into makeshift offices and meeting rooms. We spent hours and hours running around the dusty fields and exploring the barns and warehouses. But the place I remember most in Delano was Filipino Hall.

Filipino Hall

In mid-April of 1966, Filipino Hall was a seldom-used and rundown social hall for the many single male Filipino agricultural workers. By June, it had been cleaned up and a strike kitchen was put in place. The old lodge hall had an auditorium that could hold about 150 people. This is where I learned what the farmworker struggle was all about. We ate most of our dinners at the strike kitchen, both for the companionship and because it was part of Dad and Mom's pay. We had homemade tortillas and wonderful rice and beans. Sometimes there would be big pots of delicious soup. Some of the food was purchased and some donated. One soup that was often served consisted of fish heads and tails in a broth. Those nights I ate mostly tortillas and beans.

It was great fun sitting and eating with so many different people. Dinner was a big production, due to the large number of workers and volunteers needing to be fed. When we finished eating, Mom, Mark, Merrily, and I would go into the big hall and draw pictures to send as thank yous to people who donated food, clothing, or money to the cause. The cards were supposed to be from kids, but Mom and some of the other mothers helped the smaller kids. We also helped paint picket signs and strike banners.

On Friday nights, everyone gathered at the hall for the weekly rally. The rallies usually started with a prayer of thanks by different priests and ministers. After the prayer, we would get an update on recent union activities. Cesar or Dolores Huerta would give a motivational speech and get everyone excited about the upcoming week's events. Striking farmworkers would get up and give their testimony about working conditions and injustices they had endured from certain farmers or field supervisors. There were also lots of boycott stories. The speeches were presented in both Spanish and English. I was beginning to learn more and more Spanish words.

Often during the speeches and testimonies, the kids would take off and play outside. We had a number of good friends because there were a lot of children. We spent time with Jim Drake's boys, Matt and Tommy, as well as Cesar's and Dolores's children. We would play hide-and-seek for hours in the warm summer evenings outside the hall.

My two favorite activities of the evening were watching El Teatro Campesino perform and listening to the group singing that followed. Luis Valdez, who later wrote the screenplay for the hit movie *La Bamba* and the stage play and movie *Zoot Suit*, was the director and main actor for El Teatro Campesino. We would laugh, cheer, and boo as we watched the playettes about working and living conditions, strike stories, and political satires. The evening usually ended with strike, folk, and church songs.

I felt a powerful energy surging through the room as we stood in the packed auditorium with everyone holding hands and singing "We Shall Not Be Moved," "*De Colores*," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "We Shall Overcome," and other favorite songs. We would all stand up, cross our arms and hold hands with the person standing on either side. It is hard

to explain the intense feeling and swell of emotions being in a room of swaying people all holding hands and connecting both physically and spiritually. Sometimes my throat would constrict from the intense feeling. I would stop and listen and just feel the love and strong sense of oneness in the room. The evening would end as it began—with a prayer to carry everyone through the week. If someone entered the hall feeling discouraged or defeated, he or she left feeling invigorated and optimistic.

Follow That Scab

One night when Mom was driving us to Delano to join Dad for dinner, she spotted a truck leaving a small farm. She got very excited. “Mark, Karen, that’s a scab truck. We need to get the license number so we can call it in.” She slowly increased the speed of the car and inched closer and closer to the back of the truck.

One problem the strike was having at the packing yards was identifying which trucks held scab grapes and which had union grapes. Scab grapes are the grapes that are picked by non-union workers. The solution was to write down the license numbers of trucks seen leaving specific farms and calling ahead to headquarters, where the information was passed on to the picket line. Mom’s excitement was infectious. We were all straining to read the letters and numbers on the plates. I was sitting in the front seat next to Mom. “Quick,” she said, “look in my purse for some paper and a pen.” I looked in her purse and in the glove compartment. No pen or pencil in sight. I found a map in the glove box but nothing to write with. Mom was concentrating on getting close enough to read the license plate, but was worried about tipping off the driver. “You never know what might happen,” she cautioned. Mark was calling out the numbers in the hopes that we could just memorize them. He kept repeating the numbers over and over. Mom yelled to grab her lipstick and use it. I wrote the numbers, as best I could, on the back of the map with Mom’s red lipstick. Mark continued to say the numbers over and over, just in case we couldn’t read my writing. I had only recently learned to print. Mom eased back on the accelerator and the truck slipped away.

There was a gas station up ahead and Mom said we should stop and call the license in. Mark and I were thrilled. We had just made what we felt was our first real significant contribution to the strike. We had marched and walked the picket line many, many times, but somehow this felt more real and significant. Mom got back in the car after calling in the license plate number and said we might as well get some gas while we were there. She pumped the gas while Mark and I recounted our triumph. “Mom, can we go to the bathroom?” I yelled out the window. Merrily, Mark, and I got out of the car and headed to the bathrooms. Immediately, a large man walked out and looked us over. “No stinking Mexican is going to use my bathroom,” he said. The three of us froze in our tracks. I inched closer to Mark and grabbed his hand. I didn’t like this man at all. He scared me. Mom walked over to us. “Lady, you get this kid out of here, he isn’t going to dirty up my bathroom,” the man said. Mom replied, “He is just a little boy. We bought gas and now the kids need to use your facilities.”

The man just shook his head from side to side. Mom's face was turning red and I could see she was getting mad. "Fine" she said as she put her arm on Mark's shoulder. "You kids can just go to the bathroom right here on the side of the building." Mark and I looked at each other in disbelief. Was she serious? Did we really have to go the bathroom right there in front of everyone? Mark said he didn't think he really needed to go anymore, but Mom was persistent. "Lady, you have got to be kidding," the man said. Mom stood her ground. In frustration, he finally gave in. "Okay, fine. Let the brats use the bathroom. But, if he makes a mess, *you* have to clean it up," he said, his finger pointing menacingly at Mom.

There was a moment of silence and then she told us to go ahead and that she would be right outside. As Merrily and I were washing our hands, I had a plan. I wadded up a bunch of paper towels and tossed them on the floor. I smiled, thinking I was quite clever to think of this. When we got back in the car, I asked Mom why the gas station man was so mean. She said that some people were just hateful and ignorant. They judge people by their skin color instead of what's inside. She explained that some people were just raised differently and didn't know anything but hate and mistrust. The rest of the ride to the hall was quiet. Dad was there to meet us for dinner. I tried to be happy and excited about spotting the truck, but that man's ugly words kept repeating in my head.

Don't Hit the Padre

Mark, Merrily, and I would sometimes stay home while Dad and Mom went to the early morning pickets that started at 4 or 5 in the morning when the workers started in the fields. Mark and I were going to school, although sporadically, in between marches, picket lines, and rallies.

We attended one picket line that will forever stay in my memory. We were at one of several fruit packing sheds next to the railroad tracks on the outskirts of town. The picket line had some 30 people slowly walking and blocking the entrance to the trucks carrying grapes from farms that were refusing to grant the farmworkers access to their workers for a union vote. Our family car was a big white Dodge van. It was parked just outside the packing shed. It was a perfect place for a group of kids to hang out when we were tired of walking or when the police showed up. That night Matt and Tommy Drake were with us in the van along with a jumble of sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows. We were singing songs to entertain ourselves as we alternated between watching the picket line and playing. I faintly heard sirens off in the distance. They were getting louder and louder. I jumped into the front seat so I could get a better look at what was going on.

When the police arrived they were decked out in riot gear and had their clubs drawn and ready. They walked over to the picket line and formed their own line facing the picketers. One cop had a bullhorn and was telling the picketers they were forming an illegal assembly and that they must disperse immediately. The picketers joined hands and continued slowly walking the oval picket line and chanting loudly: "*Viva La Huelga!*" I looked for Mom and

Dad in the sea of people. It was not hard to spot Dad. Besides being more than 6 feet tall, he wore what we called his minister uniform of a plain gray denim work shirt with a white collar and his big wooden cross dangling around his neck.

It was a common union tactic to make sure the clergy stood out in an attempt to discourage violence against the picketers. Many nuns who picketed would wear their habits. There were a large number of religious people involved in the farmworker movement. The police started heading closer to the line and there was a lot of shouting. The picketers were refusing to disperse and continued to chant and sing. I could hear them sing the first line from "We Shall Not Be Moved."

Standing in front of Dad was a reservist cop who was a local pharmacist during the day. The cop turned away from Dad as if he were leaving. Suddenly he turned back and struck Dad squarely in the stomach with his baton. I screamed as I saw Dad double over in pain. Mom ran towards Dad but was restrained by other strikers. The cop raised the stick again and struck Dad in the head. A group of women rushed over, placed themselves between Dad and the cop, waving their signs and yelling "Don't hurt the father. Shame on you for striking a padre." Mom was being held back by some picketers to keep her away from Dad and the cop. Before you could blink an eye, there was a melee of pushing, shoving, picket signs, and batons everywhere.

A second group of cops arrived and the situation calmed down. Some of the strikers were arrested. I had heard many stories at the Friday night rallies about violence during picket lines and marches, but this was my first experience witnessing it first hand. It was terrifying. It was slowly sinking in that it was absolutely vital that we be allowed to unionize. We had to win!

Firemen Are Your Friends

The very next day after this event, I sat in my kindergarten class in disbelief listening to the teacher's lesson. She was telling us that firemen and policemen are our friends. She said that if a child was ever in trouble or someone needed help, you should call a policeman or fireman. I raised my hand and asked "Why did the police beat up my Dad and the others if they are our friends?"

She didn't offer any response or explanation and went on with the lesson. At recess time, after the other kids had left, she asked me what had happened. I told her all about Dad and the others. She stared at me in disbelief. "I assure you, Karen, the police are here to help all citizens. You have no need to be afraid. Only criminals need to fear the police." I listened to what she said but didn't feel reassured. Were Mom and Dad criminals? I was very confused. After what I had witnessed the night before, the last person on earth I would have asked for help was a cop.

That night at dinner, Mom and Dad explained that if a child was ever in trouble or lost, a policeman or fireman would be happy to help. Dad said that most policemen are good, caring people. He explained that the men last night were angry because Cesar was trying to change the ways things had been done for a very long time. "Sometimes," he went on, "change is difficult for people to accept. We have to be patient and teach them why it is better to be good to the people who work so hard for them." He also reiterated Cesar's belief in nonviolent protest. Mom and Dad told me about Mahatma Gandhi and his struggles against the British. Nonviolent protest was also the key to Gandhi's success. I told them I understood, but I made a secret pact with myself to never ask a cop for help. They might think I was a criminal too. If I needed help, I'd find a fireman.

Fire Bomb

Dad was chosen by Cesar Chavez to go to Washington, D.C. and serve as the lobbyist for the farmworkers on behalf of the National Council of Churches' Migrant Ministry. He received an unusual sendoff. Dad was working late one night at his office in Delano, which was in the back of an old stucco store. Cesar, Dolores, Jim Drake, and other strike leaders had offices there and next door as well. While Dad was working, he heard a large crash coming from the front of the office. A truck had rammed the front of the building. A wall and window were broken in and a Molotov cocktail had been tossed inside. The truck was backing away by the time Dad got to the front of the office. He was able to easily put out the small fire that had flashed up.

At the time, Dad had been waiting for a call from a reporter with the San Francisco office of the Associated Press, who had scheduled an interview about Dad's move to Washington. While Dad was telling the reporter about the first fire, a second firebomb was thrown through the already broken window into his office. A second fire broke out among the shards of glass. Dad quickly told the reporter that he had to hang up because a firebomb had just exploded and he had to go put out the resulting fire. The reporter insisted that Dad call him back with all the details.

At this point a number of people had gathered to see what was going on. When the police and firefighters arrived, the fire was barely smoldering. When we heard the story before we had a chance to talk with Dad, my imagination got the best of me. I imagined an exploding building. The two fires were small, but the message was loud and clear. I had nightmares for many months about huge explosions and imagined Dad and the others fighting to escape the burning building. A few days after the incident, the local fire marshal repeatedly suggested to news reporters that Dad had started the fire himself in order to gain sympathy and publicity for the union. As I was to learn over and over again, there was no shortage of people who hated us simply for standing up for what we believed was right.

