

## Carlos and Linda LeGerrette 1966–1978

### Blessed to Serve

My 12-year-old granddaughter, Natalie (“Tati”), apprehensively commented at a peace march she was participating in with me, her Nani (Linda), and thousands of San Diegans against the impending war in Iraq, “I’m scared with all these policeman all over the place.” Without thought I responded, “Mija, a long time ago I used to feel the same way, but now it kind of turns me on.”

During the march that statement would run through my head over and over again, above the antiwar chants, the whistles, and the assortment of noisemakers and drums of fellow protestors. My thoughts would take me through decades of experience and stop at the steps of the farmworker movement. That movement, and Cesar Chavez, has so totally changed our lives that it is practically impossible to back out of our present existence from past days as volunteers in the United Farm Workers that began in 1966.

Here’s a classic example. On December 2, 2003, my wife, Linda, and I presented the Lillian Rodriguez Jogoleff Community Service Award to Sophia “Minnie” Ybarra. This award was given at a United Domestic Workers union (UDW) celebration announcing the prestigious Ford Foundation’s Leadership Award to UDW’s top officers, Ken Seaton Msemaji and Fahari Jeffers. So what does all this mean?

First, the award presented to Minnie Ybarra is named in honor of Linda’s mother, Lillian Jogoleff, (“Grandma Lil”), who died 10 days prior. Grandma Lil was the cook during the early 1970s who dished out some spectacular cuisine in the “kitchen” of the La Paz farmworker headquarters in Keene. She would become the UDW’s first member and host its first house meeting (guided by Fred Ross, Sr.).

Second, the recipient, Minnie Ybarra, is our very close friend whom we met in 1968 when she began as a local UFW volunteer. Practically the whole Ybarra family, including four sons and their father, would also join.

Third, we came into formal contact with the Ford Foundation awardees, Ken Seaton Msemaji and Fahari Jeffers, in 1975, when they first began meeting with Cesar regarding organizing a union for domestic workers. Today, the UDW is one of the nation’s fastest growing unions. Lots of water has passed under the bridge in the past 38 years. Most of the memories have been exhilarating, and, as in all movements, some not so pleasant.

How could this movement lead us down a path that for decades has completely influenced our lives, and millions more? Linda and I are city folk. We had never worked in the fields. We thought our dreams of fortune and the “good life” would begin after college. Graduation for these two college seniors (us) was the first casualty. “What is more

important?” the late Rev. Jim Drake would challenge us, “Helping these striking farmworkers build a union or staying in college”?

We discussed our options and decided not to attend the college summer session and instead volunteer the summer to help the farmworkers. That summer would last 12 years. Our dream of forever being together remains. And even though the compensation was \$5 per week and room and board, one has to wonder how our lives today could be so rich in social capital, mission, and meaning. The movement has paid very handsome dividends. Someday we will figure out how we contributed a collective quarter of a century to a movement that was totally outside any work we had done.

Our families shared some core similarities. Besides the Mexican ancestry in both our families, we also blend first-generation non-Mexican immigrants within the family tree. Linda’s side would be Russian, and Carlos’s, Asian. A strong work ethic was passed down. An understanding of this ethic may have played a strong role in our volunteering.

We became involved with the farmworkers right after we and a handful of others established the San Diego–based, MAYA (Mexican-American Youth Association). Gracia Molina de Pick, now a close personal friend, and then our very progressive community college professor and MAYA advisor, recommended we attend a meeting of the local support group of the Delano grape strike. Most in that group were much earlier generation activists and were very happy to ask (push) us into leading the San Diegans for La Huelga committee. This was the perfect issue in building a strong MAYA (now MECHa). And it worked.

Our first Huelga activity was organizing caravans to Delano. We took donated food, clothing, and a few collected dollars to support the strikers. In return, we were indoctrinated into La Huelga 101. We regularly led, with our 1965 VW bug, many other caravans. The names and faces at Filipino Hall were more familiar. The Filipino brothers, Jim Drake, Helen Chavez, LeRoy Chatfield, Phillip VeraCruz, Larry Itilong, Cesar Chavez, Marshall Ganz, Dolores Huerta, Jerry Cohen, Eliseo Medina, and Manual Chavez were some of the first we met.

Linda was awed by Cesar Chavez. She continues to be the very competitive, hard-driving, and well-studied individual who was pushed hard in her early years by her Russian immigrant father. She felt an almost immediate “calling” to become part of the farmworker struggle. Linda recalls how she and other college students, primarily Latinos from throughout California, listened intently while Cesar described in detail the war the workers were waging and how much the movement needed the students to join as full-time volunteers. A couple seconds after Cesar’s talk, and in seamless fashion, Jim Drake made his “join us” plea, and that was all that was necessary for Linda to sign on.

Returning to San Diego from Delano with a flea-infested puppy later named Huelgista, a gift from Phillip VeraCruz to the LeGerrettes, we spoke hardly a word. According to

Linda, a mental telepathic agreement was made between her and Carlos to put their financial affairs in order and volunteer the summer for La Causa. That summer would last 12 years.

Carlos's excitement came from the ganglet of movement rule-breakers he would befriend in the Hall. It is easy to follow how he would feel very comfortable with these rule-breakers. His K-12 years were not so positively received by school administrators. Carlos attended some 13 schools before graduating. However, he sensed a much different and more powerful "return" from joining up with this band of movement activists. His background was a perfect fit in the organized nonviolence action of the movement. Breaking rules here was rewarded with respect, praise, and a true feeling of accomplishment and belonging—a much different deal than in earlier years.

Manuel Chavez would get us to begin organizing official UFW boycott activities right after Linda and I married in 1966. Although San Diego didn't receive the attention that much of the cities north of our area did, we were very proud of the tremendous success that we had in front of stores that sold the boycotted grapes. Never did our area receive training in the initial years regarding ridding the stores of grapes. However, that didn't stop hundreds of students, and others, from picketing local stores.

After a number of successes over the next four years, including the signing of the grape contracts that enabled the local boycott office to close down, Carlos became the director of the educational opportunities program at San Diego State University. Within months, Rev. Jim Drake was again asking us to leave what we were doing and move to the newly acquired Keene retreat properties where the farmworker movement would consolidate all their administrative offices. Cesar would name this retreat community *Nuestra Senora de La Paz* (La Paz).

So, in February of 1971, we loaded "La Bamba"—our primed 1955 Chevrolet pickup—with a few prized possessions, and the three of us, including our two-year-old daughter, Tonantzin, headed northeast to La Paz where we would take up residence for the next five-plus years.

The La Paz families were primarily housed in trailers and small cottages. Many families would make their homes in the most unusual nooks and crannies in one of the three wings of the former hospital. Stony Brook Hospital was part of La Paz that at one time, some decades ago, housed tuberculosis patients, who were isolated from the general public. Our south wing abode was the former 350-square-foot prep kitchen complete with two huge stainless-steel sinks that would become Tonantzin's personal bathtub. We spent two precious days preparing and painting the room with some Mike Kratko-found paint. We then added our stereo, long-playing albums (Carlos Santana, the Beatles, and "oldies"), a mattress on the floor, and candles, and listed the ways in which our new "digs" were better than the six-times-larger home we left back in San Diego.

Our newfound responsibilities would be the National Farm Workers Service Center in La Paz. Two southern California kids thrust into totally strange problems including the sewer pond, the boiler room, ice-plugged pipes, trash pick-up, inadequate heat, leaking roofs, non-ending hospital issues, and on....and on....and on. And we loved it! Linda was anointed the point person to report problems to and eventually became the official unofficial La Paz mayor.

Although we had been involved in the movement for over five years, La Paz is where we felt totally and intimately involved. Here we learned volumes about the movement, the players, and ourselves. Much of the credit for this would go to Cesar. He was a master at getting individuals to believe in themselves. During our La Paz years, we would be assigned to many roles and responsibilities including National Farm Worker Service Center director, purchasing director, transportation director, and assistant to the president, to name just a few. Many of the assignments involved starting departments from scratch.

Cesar taught us how to “think big.” For example, in setting up the purchasing department, we quickly learned that Cesar was looking beyond our recommended pallet purchase of copy paper. He was far more interested in purchasing a freight car loaded with paper to be delivered to La Paz. There was much to be learned. And we did.

We were very happy in La Paz. This was home, even though we left generations of family to take on this new chapter in our lives. We didn’t take notes or discuss our changing during our wonderful years living in this mountain hamlet. There was a tremendous appreciation for the work we did. This didn’t come from any one person saying how great a job we were doing, but the challenges thrown at us from Cesar.

This is where we could see how tremendously strong, well organized, and tough the movement was. Hundreds of \$5-a-week-and-room-and-board volunteers and layers of strong dedicated leadership working together in the various departments of the union, the service center (including La Paz), the clinics, the credit union, the legal department, etc. Under Cesar’s leadership, and a board of directors that brought many of the pieces together, the movement developed its own formidable swagger and there was no one we were afraid of. We took on Governor Reagan, President Nixon, the growers, the Teamsters, the Republican Party, and any other opponent who wanted a piece of us. And, for the most part, we prevailed.

Today, the beginning of 2004, will find many of the movement volunteers still involved in progressive action. Some continue to work in the labor movement, others lead meaningful nonprofits, while entrepreneurship has taken many into private enterprise, and education has brought many “radicals” into the classroom. Within all of this, it seems that the thread that keeps many going is the teaching of meaningful organization. Without any doubt, the movement prepared us to blaze uncharted trails in the post-movement period.

A rare and aggressive cancer would force us to make an emotionally difficult decision to leave the La Paz community and return to family in San Diego. We're positive that our time spent in the movement was a major mental factor defeating the cancer. Today, the lessons we've learned over the years allow us to continue to blaze our own trail doing meaningful work. These activities include working with individuals and organizations representing labor, the environment, youth, political office, and other community activities sandwiched by two successful entrepreneurial businesses that have paid the bills.

We continue the self-sufficiency model we learned. We're sure that other lessons of fearlessness, determination, and discipline have helped us. Without the movement experience, who knows what we would have done with our lives. We're positive we would have landed on our feet, but where? Life could have been very boring. We couldn't have done it alone and for comfort and support we constantly rely upon the close personal relationships developed in the struggle. The friendships we made during those years have enriched our lives far beyond description.

It is our belief that the best way those of us who were blessed to serve is to continue to engage ourselves in teaching the valuable organizational lessons learned during the formidable years. That is the movement's legacy, and Cesar's.

Our contribution are the Cesar E. Chavez service clubs. These clubs are rooted in many of San Diego's K-12 schools. Organized two years ago, these leadership development clubs give young Chavistas (club members), beginning in grade 3, a wonderful opportunity to practice leadership and team building via community service projects. The foundation of the clubs is based on the values of nonviolence, tolerance, respect, innovation, determination, knowledge, a preference to serve the most needy, celebrating community, service to others, and sacrifice. Today, the club advisors (teachers), who are very supportive but lack adequate quality club time, are being supplanted by Price scholars (community college students) funded by Sol Price, Price Club founder, and longtime supporter of the UFW and other progressive causes.

Our vision is that by the time the Chavistas graduate from high school, they will be able to run a meeting, discuss issues, vote, follow and execute a plan, be responsible and totally accountable for their actions, or inaction. Our granddaughter, Natalie, is president of her school's Chavez service club. Now a third grader, our grandson Joe-Carlos is very eager to join.

We also strongly believe, and have supported for many years, that a reunion of the movement volunteers has to take place. Much of the movement history has to be documented. If we allow this opportunity to slip away, then we take full responsibility when some historian who has absolutely no clue writes "our" history. Not a good option.

Hopefully, the Documentation Project is the beginning step that will bring many of the pieces together. This process will occur much quicker as soon as other organizations and

individuals leave their egos at the door. The majority of “we” volunteers are now in the 50-year-old-and-above gang. Each time a volunteer passes, we lose some more history. And a totally inclusive reunion would also bring with it an opportunity for some much-needed healing.

Who would have believed that the man who led the movement for so many years would become a hero to so many? The Cesar E. Chavez holiday in California is the beginning of future holidays in other states. And probably a national holiday.

Our personal lives have been so enriched by the 12 years we volunteered to the movement. We still ride the same horse. Our true friends in the movement are still our best friends even after 38 years. There are very few opportunities in life to serve, as many of us rule-breakers have. We are forever grateful for the wonderful and fulfilling challenges that still come our way because of the movement. The challenge to all of us is how to meaningfully share our past experience in shaping the future. We did it then and we can do it now. *Si Se Puede!*