

Liz (Taylor) Keogh 1967–1969

Back in the early 1950s when I was in elementary school, my mother's only sibling, my "other" Uncle Gene, worked in Bogotá, Colombia, for U.S. Steel. During his "home leave" I found out that he lived in a faraway country where they didn't speak English. I was fascinated. Uncle Gene set me up with a pen pal and acted as translator for our letters. Thanks to the local public library, half a block from my home, I immersed myself in "beginning Spanish." Who knows where I'd be now if Uncle Gene had been posted to a non-Spanish speaking country?

By mutual agreement with my parents, I spent my high school years at girls' boarding school in New York State, about 70 miles from my home. The senior class in my first year consisted of six young women, four of them from Venezuela. Although later classes also had South American students, they were not the majority: of the 20 entering students in my class, most were U.S.-born North Americans. This opportunity to immerse myself in the spoken language also permitted my South American schoolmates to teach me about their food, music, holidays, and celebrations. Whatever else I learned in high school takes a distant second to the education I received from those young women.

For the first semester of my freshman year at college, I moved back to my parents' home. On the day after Thanksgiving that year, 1960, Ed Murrow narrated "Harvest of Shame" on TV. It had a profound effect on me. It was personal as well as political because my mother's housekeeper at the time was originally from North Carolina and had been part of the East Coast migrant stream before moving to New York City.

In college in the early 1960s, there were far more interesting things to learn and to do outside the classroom than in it. At the end of that five-year stint (one year off for bad academic behavior), with a degree in philosophy under my belt, I found my way to Cleveland. The National Defense Education Act graciously funded my graduate studies for a degree of Master of Science in Social Administration (elsewhere known as an MSW) in community organization.

During my first year in Cleveland, in the early spring of 1966, an NFWA volunteer named Ida Cousino arrived to drum up support for the then-fledgling grape boycott. I had done some research papers in college on the Rural Redevelopment Act and the Bracero program, and found occasional newspaper articles and TV reports about a farmworkers' union and Cesar Chavez absolutely compelling. With Ida's arrival in Cleveland, it all transformed from words and pictures to flesh and blood. At some point I contacted Ida and she agreed to come to the school to make a presentation about the union. I wrote an article for the school newspaper about the boycott and a meeting on campus at which Ida would speak. The turnout was terrific. The high point, for me, was finding out from Ida how I could join in the work, preferably in California. She told me to contact Chris

Hartmire of the California Migrant Ministry, which I promptly did. I am forever indebted to Ida and to Chris.

Chris invited me to spend the summer of 1966 as an intern with the CMM. They offered a stipend of \$300 (because I was a graduate student: undergrads got only \$150). I was told to show up in Modesto on a certain date for training and orientation, from which assignments would be made.

So I set off in an old pink-and-white Rambler American. It had fold-down front seats, the better to sleep in along the side of the road. Though I had been to Europe in the summer of 1965, I had never been west of Pennsylvania until this trip. It was a fabulous trip. I saw roadside signs touting the John Birch Society; stayed at a public park in Nebraska; and encountered a 90-mph speed limit in Kansas. I stayed at a reservation in the process of constructing a campground for travelers so there was no one there but me. In the morning, the groundskeeper knocked on the car window to invite me for breakfast, which his wife was preparing at their home. I marveled at the vistas in the Grand Tetons and barely made it over the Rockies (I knew it was not good when an 18-wheeler passed me on a rather slight incline).

Finally, after a week or so, I made it into Modesto and called my mother to let her know I had arrived in one piece. When, in answer to her questions, I told her I had not stayed in hotels or motels, but in the car, she became very upset. Since I was and had been perfectly OK, I couldn't understand her overreaction to what I thought was a normal way to travel.

In Modesto, there were about a dozen "volunteers," most of them from California. We learned about the failed former attempts to organize farmworkers, the current efforts of the NFWA, the role of the (Protestant) churches in promoting social justice in the fields and elsewhere, some culinary and other aspects of Mexican culture in the U.S., and all kinds of stuff that was completely new to me. A wonderful Anglo woman (Kathy?) was one of the leaders of the group, and a minister named Pablo Jimenez from Guadalajara, who played a beautiful guitar, also instructed us. Some time afterwards, I learned that I was the first Roman Catholic accepted into the volunteer program. Ecumenism between Protestants and Roman Catholics was not very functional in those days, so the Migrant Ministry, supported by the essentially protestant Council of Churches, had every reason to be skeptical about including me in one of their programs (and on scholarship, no less!).

At the end of the week's training/orientation, I was sent to Del Rey with Thea Barrios, who had been born in Peru and whose family lived in San Francisco. She later married Owen Peterson, who may also have been part of that summer internship. What I remember about Owen is that he had a Volkswagen bug with over 200,000 miles on it! They later moved to Lamont, a "suburb" of Bakersfield.

Our living quarters in Del Rey were provided by the First Mexican American Baptist Church, pastored by Rev. Garcia (I think), whose love for fresh-cut jalapeños amazed even his congegrants. Thea and I had full use of the church's facilities, including a kitchen that

was the size of my entire apartment in Cleveland, with burners on the stove of similar proportion. The pots and pans were meant to cook enough food for the whole congregation, so it was a trick to figure out how to prepare “downsized” meals. For the first two weeks, I ate little but lettuce. It was so hot and I was so miserable that I just couldn’t keep any “real” food down. Eventually I got over it.

Thea and I spent most of our time at a horrible place called Shorty’s Labor Camp that was, I think, in Parlier. I had never seen such squalid living quarters. I had been to many tenements in New York, some close to my home, all in multistory buildings whose halls reeked of urine and garbage. The public housing projects in the city weren’t much better. And in Cleveland, those of us from New York had been amazed that some neighborhoods of apparent single-family dwellings were considered part of “the ghetto,” until we found out that single families no longer lived in them, so the interiors of the dwellings were as bad, if not worse, than the apartments planted in concrete in New York. At least some of the houses in Cleveland had lawn areas, but that was of little comfort to the families living in the cramped quarters beyond the lawns.

Shorty’s was something totally different. It was a string of one-room shacks, some detached, some not, in an L- or U-shaped arrangement around a barren, dusty piece of common dirt with one tree. The raw sewage from the shacks ran out into shallow gullies behind them. When Thea and I were there during the day, only women and small children were present because the men and older children were out working in the fields. When we raised questions about the living conditions for which they were paying unconscionable sums, many of the residents made it clear to us that they were delighted with the accommodations. Or at least they were not going to complain to management, because they feared they would be evicted and there was a long line of people who would be only too happy to replace them. And we knew this was true: In Del Rey, families from Texas and Mexico were living and sleeping in their cars. Some years later I read that while the population of Del Rey and environs was a few thousand year-round, it swelled to more than 10,000 during the summer. I didn’t doubt it.

Thea and I attended the Wednesday and Sunday services at the church. This wasn’t a big deal for me, because my parents had been very open-minded about respecting the religious beliefs and ceremonies of others. I was reviled at my Catholic school when it was discovered that I belonged to the Brownie troop at the local Episcopalian church. Well, it was the nearest one, and my parents made it plain to the school officials that religious bigotry was not going to prevent them from permitting me to participate in Brownie and Girl Scout activities. Our next-door neighbors, the Tiffanys, belonged to the Arlington Avenue Presbyterian Church. After I learned to recite “The Night Before Christmas,” I was one of the featured entertainers at the holiday ladies’ club meeting.

In Brooklyn, one of the civic holidays for the public schools was “Anniversary Day,” celebrating “the coming of Protestantism” to the borough. Parades and celebrations were held all over, including a parade in my neighborhood. Catholic schools did NOT have that day off, of course. One year the Tiffanys invited me to march in the parade with their

church's Sunday school kids. My parents agreed, and there I was with my little doll carriage marching along the avenue. Some of my classmates saw me in the parade on their way home from school, and since I'd been absent that day, immediately reported it to school authorities the next day. There was quite an uproar. I was called a "traitor" and worse by my schoolmates, but my parents defended their decision and my participation in the parade to the school administrators. So I learned at a fairly early age, when it wasn't very popular, that tolerance and defense of others' beliefs, especially if those differed from your own (which were not to be abandoned or minimized in the fray, just emphasized as "different") was an important rule of life. In Del Rey, participating in the religious services was a way for Thea and me to meet the congregants who were so generously supporting us and to show our appreciation and respect for their concern for the people with whom we were working.

At Shorty's, Thea and I divided up our work: I wasn't particularly interested in entertaining the children, but she thought that was wonderful and she had a talent for it. And she wasn't particularly interested in "organizing" the adults to find out what, if anything, we could do to improve their conditions without jeopardizing their residency. So while she worked with the kids, I talked with the adults. I think she did a lot more good keeping those children entertained each day with stories and games than I did talking with the women, because there wasn't much that could be done to help them.

At the end of the summer we had a party in the common area with a big piñata. And I wound up taking a woman and her daughter from Shorty's to Albuquerque, where she had relatives. When she learned I'd be heading East to go home, she showed me the new and old bruises all over her bra-less torso from the daily beatings she had endured from the man she had accompanied to California. She asked if I could drop her and her daughter off. How could I say no? We stopped for the night in a campground in Needles. If I never go back there, it will be too soon. The heat, even at night, was worse than in Del Rey.

I can't imagine that the Migrant Ministry didn't hold a debriefing for us volunteers when the summer was over, but if they did, I have completely forgotten about it. I hope Chris Hartmire doesn't hold that against me! Suffice it to say that the summer of 1966, the year that AWOC and the NFWA merged to become the UFWOC, was another life-changing experience for me. And thanks to the Migrant Ministry, I determined that when I finished grad school the next year, I would get back to California to work with the newer and stronger union. I had seen, close up, exactly what it was that they were trying to do. It was clear that the task was daunting and it would take an army of people to make any kind of dent in the miserable conditions under which people who followed the crops were living and working. And like all of us, I knew it could be done. I wanted to be part of that effort.

So just after marrying Bil Taylor in April 1967 and before graduating in June, I again contacted Chris Hartmire. He invited us to come to Delano. From Pixley, I called the union office and was told to report to Jim Drake at the pink house upon our arrival.

Jim sent us to the “volunteer house” on 15th Avenue just off Albany. Because Taylor and I were married, we were assigned to private quarters in the cement-slab garage. We’d brought air mattresses, so the lack of furnishings was not problematic. At the time we moved in, Jessica Govea was living in the “common” quarters. Fran Ryan and/or Mary Lou Watson may have been there, too.

In July and August, I worked at the pink house. Taylor did, too, but also was on the 24-hour picket line at DiGiorgio in Edison, doing the night shift. One day when I came home from the “office,” he informed me that some of the other residents had been disturbed because at 8:00 am or so, after getting home, he had chugged down a beer (which he’d bought) upon his return to the house. The other residents thought that beer for breakfast belied a commitment to “La Causa.”

Over the next year or so (it's hard to remember who was where when), I became better acquainted with the people in the legal affairs department: Jessica; David Averbuck; Ginny Hirsch, whose caustic sense of humor, insights, and accuracy, and proficiency on an old manual typewriter absolutely stunned me; and, of course, Jerry Cohen himself. I got to know Esther Uranday and Alicia Tapia and Cesar’s wife, Helen, in the hiring hall. David Fishlow and Doug Adair of *El Malcriado* became good friends and reappeared in my life long after I left Delano.

But when I first arrived, the person who really took me under her wing was Jeannie LaChica. She was a large Anglo woman who had married a Filipino and had previously worked in a frozen food processing plant in Watsonville, California. It was Jeannie who informed me, as we cranked out leaflets and pamphlets and other stuff on the mimeograph machine (at which she was an expert), that “house” and brand-name frozen vegetables were all the same inside the packaging. She said that in Watsonville, they’d just slapped different labels on the same chunks of peas and green beans and corn that were processed there. I was stunned by this revelation.

In September 1967, Taylor and I were sent to Seattle to organize the grape boycott there. We traveled with a bunch of other people in a beat-up union vehicle and dropped one or two (maybe Fran and Mary Lou) off in Portland on the way. After we were deposited in Seattle, the others continued on to Vancouver, British Columbia.

From September through December, Taylor and I tried to organize boycott activities. We arrived in the city with little more than the clothes we were wearing and a list of possible “contacts.” We wound up speaking at labor union meetings, church groups and services, and getting some ink in the local press. I still have the clipping of a November 23, 1967 article written by Don Duncan, a columnist for the *Seattle Times*, entitled “Happy Thanksgiving, Bil and Liz.” He notes that we both were “products of solid middle-class homes, articulate, well-educated. So what are they doing in cast-off clothing and earning \$5 each a week? Blame it on the church.” Or in my case, the California Migrant Ministry.

Except maybe for the first day or so, we stayed in the home of a fellow named Stuart. His home became ours for our entire time in Seattle. I think we were invited there after a mention during the sermon at a local church arranged by Rosemary and Verne Cooperrider. The house was in the Woodland Park neighborhood, close to the zoo, which I visited whenever I had a chance. I don't remember how we got around in the town, since we'd been dropped off there, but I think we walked, took public transportation, and relied on volunteers who'd pick us up and return us home. Stuart was the son of some Pacific Bell bigwig, as I recall, and the house was enormous. It turned out to be a crash pad for almost every homeless "freak" in Seattle. One day as I was walking in the downtown area, I heard the disheveled guy in front of me say to his equally disheveled female companion, "Well we can always stay at Stuart's." They arrived that evening.

Another quasi-permanent household resident worked at Boeing assembling small but important airplane parts. She had the most enormous hookah I had ever seen in my life, and every day before going to work, toked up because it made her perception of the tiny parts better--at least that's what she told me.

A stray German shepherd dog, Brownie, also became a household member. He'd been wandering in the neighborhood for days, and when I asked the permanent household members about it, they thought it would be terrific to have him join us. He then proceeded to terrify the mail carrier, and we got a notice about "no mail delivery" on the entire block unless Brownie was contained. We worked it out. It is a tribute to the people in the house that when Taylor and I were summoned back to Delano, Stuart found a home for Brownie on a farm in Oregon, and even sent me pictures, which I still have, of Brownie in his new home.

In addition to presentations at various meetings, we had a number of picket lines at supermarkets. One Sunday afternoon, we had a picket line at the home of a fellow who was high in the Albertson's food chain. I don't remember if he was the store manager or a regional manager or better, but he lived in a pretty expensive neighborhood. I remember hoping that the people on the line wouldn't talk to one another. There were church people and union people and communists and "intellectually superior" students. I thought that if they ever engaged in dialogue with one another, we would have a riot on the picket line. But it all went off quite uneventfully, except for the distress of the neighbors.

One day in downtown Seattle, I was approached by a scruffy young man who asked me if I worked with the "Hool-a-ga." I didn't know what he was talking about until he pointed to the button I was wearing. When I said "yes," he informed me that I should be in Yakima, not Seattle. I thanked him for his input.

The only reason that any of our efforts in Seattle were successful is due to the unfailing help we received from Rosemary and Verne Cooperrider. There was no task too small or too big to which they did not lend their gentle but determined assistance. I stayed in touch with them for some years after leaving Delano. I was very sorry to learn that Verne had

died recently. Without their help, the impact of the union on Seattle would have been far less than it was at the time.

After returning to Delano at the end of 1967, I once again hung around the pink house. Taylor and I were provided with relatively posh digs. The union had rented a small house just off a back alley on the property of Erma and Phil Maerske on Belmont Street. Erma was a teacher and Phil worked at the post office. Erma had taught most of Helen and Cesar's children. Erma especially was a very vocal supporter of the union, a stance not too popular in Delano's polite society at the time. The school administration made her pay for it. They took away her upper-grade advanced Spanish classes and required her to teach anything but Spanish to lower grades. They basically forced her into retirement, though she was only in her early 60s at the time and had looked forward to continued teaching.

Doug and David were frequent visitors to the house. One day we had a big party on the Maerskes' back lawn, and in addition to oodles of Delano union folk, Thea and Owen also showed up.

Friday night union meetings in early 1967 were highlighted by the hilarious performances presented by Luis Valdez and *El Teatro Campesino*. There was also a wonderful guy from Ithaca, New York, Mike Miller, who worked at the gasolinera and frequently played his banjo at the meetings. We stayed in touch for a while after we all left Delano. Mike moved back to the Ithaca area, but I don't know where he is now.

After the meetings, we'd collect our grocery allocations from brother Nick Yap. He always put the more exotic donations (such as cans of turtle soup) in the cardboard box marked "Taylor & Liz." He told me he did this because no one else would eat them. Larry Itliong and I maintained some contact after I moved to Michigan. That ended with his death in February 1977.

In spring of 1968, Cesar began his first fast to draw attention to the use of pesticides in the fields. The breaking of his fast, with Robert Kennedy in attendance, has been well-documented elsewhere. What most affected me and other union volunteers at the time was the decision to engage in a massive voter registration campaign throughout California. Taylor and I were sent to San Diego.

Apart from pounding the streets and registering new voters, what I remember about that posting is the Chicano student in whose home we stayed. He had little to give except space in his small apartment, and he gave it willingly and generously. When I commented on the cockroaches in his place one day, he told me that they were considered a sign of prosperity where he came from. Cockroaches don't hang around where there isn't food, he said, so their presence was a sure sign that there was food in the house.

I was in San Diego in April 1968 when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. It was lonely, because the people I knew who might understand what a shocking event it was for me were not near. Like me, they were all over California and beyond. Previously, I had

been on anti-war and civil rights marches in New York and had been to the capital a few times, most notably for the March on Washington in 1963. In the early 1960s, I thought that Malcolm X (then known as Minister Malcolm X) had a far more powerful, meaningful, and relevant message for the country. I still do. I had “met” Minister Malcolm a few times as I walked along 125th Street to a friend’s house on 130th. At the college I attended, I heard the last speech open to the general public that he gave before his assassination. I was one of the few Caucasians present in the church sanctuary at his funeral, only because I got on line very early.

But in April 1968, I could not forget the impact of Dr. King’s speech almost five years earlier. There had been some wonderful presentations, but people were still going to the bathroom and eating hot dogs. When Dr. King appeared, an almost immediate hush came over the crowd. People stopped breathing, it seemed. So in April 1968, the outlook for social justice was pretty dismal. First, Malcolm X, now Dr. King.

In San Diego, I experienced my first earthquake and thought it was wondrous. I was walking across a large, empty parking lot when it hit. It was fabulous to be rocked up and down and to see the asphalt undulating over the whole area. The next major earthquake I experienced, more than 20 years later, also had union connections. In October 1989, I was working for Kern County as a CPS (Child Protective Services) social worker in Bakersfield. A flyer had gone around advertising a conference at Asilomar and one of the sessions was being led by David Averbuck. I could not pass up the opportunity to see him once again. We caught up with each other in the dining hall before his workshop. At the end of his presentation, just as I stepped outside of the classroom at 5:00 p.m., I heard a low rumbling sound like that of a train. And then the earthquake hit. Had it not been for David, I wouldn’t have experienced that historic event.

But back to 1968. After returning to Delano from San Diego, I again gravitated to the pink house. Not for long. Towards the end of May 1968, all volunteers except for a skeleton crew were sent from Delano to East Los Angeles for a massive “get out the vote” campaign for Robert Kennedy. He was running in a hotly contested presidential primary against Hubert Humphrey, then the vice president, after Lyndon Johnson had declared he would not seek reelection. We had computer-generated voter registration lists and were instructed to contact everyone on the list to ensure that they voted for Senator Kennedy on June 5. The strategy worked: Kennedy won the primary.

But many of us in the Ambassador Hotel that night were grumbling before the results were announced and before, once again, unimaginably terrible events transpired. Earlier, we had been told that there would be an “open” bar for all the people who had worked in the campaign and that we would get to see Senator Kennedy’s victory speech. But it turned out that there was a two-tiered victory party: one for the people who’d given money to the campaign, the other for the people like us farmworker union folk who had given shoe-leather. And there was no “open” bar for us. Some of us were sitting around complaining about the shabby treatment, practically not caring about the results, when one of our group, an Anglo guy named George, I think, who actually was interested in the results and

who had been watching the TV monitors, told us that Kennedy had been shot on his way from the main ballroom down to make a presentation to us. We all told him that as disgusted as we were, that sort of “report” was not warranted or funny. He assured us that the report was true, and of course, it was.

Shortly thereafter, an announcement came from Jim Drake for all the union people to gather in a designated spot so we could leave the hotel before it got quarantined. We went back to our church-basement lodgings and then made our way back to Delano.

After this awful event, some of us, including me, decided that there was no point in continuing to work for the union full-time. Our best hope for justice for farmworkers had just been annihilated. I applied for a job in Bakersfield with the welfare department, which had numerous openings for folks with master’s degrees.

For the next year, I tended to children in foster care during the workweek and attended to union business in the evenings and on weekends. The testing for my job (after presenting my credentials) consisted of an interview with the department director, O. C. Sills. He made it clear to me that I was not to engage in union activities on county time (I still lived in Delano), and I agreed on the condition that my non-county time could be spent however I chose, including union activities. So began my interrupted career with the Kern County Welfare Department (now the Department of Human Services). Taylor also worked for the county for a couple of months and then returned to the union full-time. In spring of 1969, he was notified that he had been accepted to graduate school at the University of Michigan. So off we went to Ann Arbor in July.

Except for a few boycott picket lines reminiscent of Seattle, I was not very involved in union activities in Ann Arbor, so far from the hub. And I became engrossed with war tax resistance, culminating in the IRS filing a criminal information complaint against me in the spring of 1974 (I beat the rap). But I stayed in touch with some of my Delano *compas*. Mary Lou Watson visited Ann Arbor. David Fishlow showed up in Paris while I was living there in 1978-79. I also stayed in touch with Erma and briefly with Ginny.

In 1983, with funding for social science research drying up all over, including at the University of Michigan where I worked, I decided to see if they still had openings for social workers in Bakersfield (Taylor and I had been divorced for eight years by then). They did! I moved back to Kern County. That summer, there was a memorial service out at 40 Acres, and Erma and I went. Much to my surprise, when I introduced myself, Helen recognized me. And she had never forgotten Erma, her children’s teacher.

At Cesar’s rosary in 1993, Erma and I were sitting on the outskirts in the back because she (87 at the time) wasn’t sure she could make it through the whole thing. We positioned ourselves to permit early exit if she desired. Towards the end of the services, I noticed a man moving folding chairs to the area right in front of us. He looked a lot like Doug Adair, with whom I had not been in contact since 1969 or so. I decided to get a better look by

discreetly circling the perimeter of the tent and approaching him. “Are you Doug Adair?” I asked. Indeed he was. I couldn’t believe it.

Doug invited me to his date harvest that fall. The invitation stated that Ginny and Fred Hirsch were also invited and had confirmed their intention to attend. We had lost touch over the years, but I knew I would crawl to Thermal to see Ginny once again. And see her I did. We stayed in close touch afterwards. I was a frequent visitor to her home in Santa Cruz. At her invitation, in 1997, I attended the presentation by the Monterey County ACLU of the Ralph G Atkinson award to Jerry Cohen. What a gathering! All kinds of UFW folk whom I hadn’t seen in 25 years were there: Jerry himself, Chris Hartmire, LeRoy Chatfield, Jessica Govea Thorbourne.

Ginny invited me to another gathering in Santa Cruz on Nov 11, 2001 to celebrate Jim Drake’s life. Once again I saw people who had been indelibly etched in my memory 35 years earlier. I also got to meet a whole bunch of people who’d come afterwards.

Shortly before he died, Philip Vera Cruz was the speaker at some function at the welfare department. I went to say hello to him, and was quite flattered that he claimed to remember me.

Susan Drake’s admirable compilation of contact information for those of us who spent time with the union, especially in its early days, has also permitted me to know the cyberspace whereabouts of some other people from that time. I want and need to say “hello” to some of them once again.

When I look back on my brief time with the union, it is clear that what I did or accomplished was far less important than who it was done with. We volunteers forged incredibly strong bonds, some of which still exist. Our support for one another meant that we could do anything--absolutely anything--together. We believed that united, we were invincible. Whatever hadn’t been achieved, or had failed in the past, like organizing farmworkers, was not impossible. We would do it. And in large measure, we did.

Those of us who knew Ginny Hirsch are diminished by her death in January 2003. But for me, hers is a life that is “mutatur non tollitur” as the preface in the Latin version of the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead states: “changed, not taken away.” I can hear her snide comments about current political affairs as clearly now as I did one or 10 or even 35 years ago.

So I write this in tribute to Ginny and to honor the work of Chris Hartmire and the California Migrant Ministry, without whom I would not have the fulfilled and fulfilling life that I have today. I know that I got much more from the CMM and the union than I ever gave to either of them.