

Rudy Ahumada 1967–1971

In September of 1965, I was working for the U.S. Post Office, in Delano, California, when the farmworkers went on strike in the grape fields of Delano. At first, the Filipinos struck the grape growers for higher wages and better working conditions. Within a short time, the National Farm Workers Association, directed by Cesar Chavez, joined the striking Filipinos and walked out of the fields.

Why was this important to me? I was 21 when the Delano strike began. I had worked in the fields since the age of five. For many years I picked and chopped cotton in Corcoran and Delano. I also picked raisin grapes in Fresno, Selma, and Fowler, and table grapes in Delano, and did other types of farm labor. It was expected of us to provide for our food and clothing.

We lived in Corcoran for many years and migrated up and down the valley. Our family finally settled in Delano (where I was born in 1944) in 1959. In Delano, in addition to picking table and wine grapes, I spent many summers loading cannery grapes onto the semi-trucks and picking potatoes and tomatoes.

From a very young age, I had a strong desire to get out of the fields and do something more constructive and productive with my life. I had seen and experienced the backbreaking work of being a farmworker. I saw what farm work did to my parents—physically, mentally, and socially. For that reason, I decided to achieve in school to make a better life for myself, my family, and to help those who most needed help. After graduating from high school, I got one of the “best jobs in town.” I became a civil servant working for the U. S. Postal Service. My job title was distribution clerk.

My parents were members of the NFWA from its inception in 1962. They both passed away years later, in 1973 and 1976. At the time of their deaths, they were still dues-paying members in good standing. I knew of the NFWA because of my parents. Shortly after the Delano strike began, I met Cesar. Sally, my wife’s sister, was married to Richard Chavez, Cesar’s brother. In a way, I guess one can say, there was some sort of “connection” with Cesar.

Because of the strong desire to leave the fields when I was young, I got the urge to help the strikers however I could. I knew that something had to be done to change the farmworkers’ living and working conditions. I began to volunteer by picketing during my off-hours while I worked at the post office. I was a temporary clerk and had a split shift, so I was able to be at the picket lines during those off-hours. Were there complaints? You bet. The growers’ wives would go and meet with the postmaster and complain. They would argue that I shouldn’t be allowed to be part of those “communists” because I worked for the federal government. Surprisingly, I had the support of the postmaster. He simply told

them that my off-hours were my time and I could do whatever I wanted during that time. So I continued.

By 1967, the movement had grown and changes had taken place. As part of those changes, the NFWA, now the United Farm Workers of America AFL-CIO, had established a service center that provided social services to the membership. Sometime in the early spring, I was asked to be part of the union. I don't recall exactly who recruited me; it may have been Cesar or LeRoy Chatfield, the director of the National Farm Workers Service Center. I accepted, and sometime around May of 1967 I went to work to work for the service center, assigned to the Farm Workers Credit Union. (I worked full-time with the union until August of 1971.) My first job was to collect delinquent loans from those members who had borrowed money (with the intent of never paying it back), and recruit new credit union members.

I learned that when a person joined the union and was recruited to do a specific job, that job was not permanent. We had many assignments and responsibilities. We were administrators, bookkeepers, accountants, janitors, guards, organizers, pickets, etc. Whatever the need was, we filled it when needed.

In July of 1967, we struck the Giumarra Vineyards Corporation (GVC). GVC, located in Edison, California (a small community just east of Bakersfield), was considered the largest table grape grower in the world. This is when the grape boycott expanded. There was an earlier boycott at the beginning of the strike directed at some of the California wines, but this strike resulted in the boycott of California table grapes.

I soon found myself in Philadelphia. I had no idea what I was going to do. I had no experience, was naïve, and found it difficult to speak in front of large groups. Several of us were assigned to different cities in the East Coast to stop the sales of the Giumarra grapes. I recall asking a friend of mine who also went East how we would stop the grapes. We wondered. We had instructions to speak to various religious, labor, and student groups, and to visit the produce markets and speak to the press. For a person like myself, who had little if any experience in speaking to groups, I was at a loss. It was a rough time. I recall Cesar speaking with us before we left about the boycott and what we hoped to do. We all agreed that it would probably take a few weeks to get the job done. That was what we thought when we left. How naïve were we. Not only did it not take a few weeks, but years later, some strikers (a.k.a. boycotters) were still in the boycott in various cities in the early 1970s. Needless to say, my first time around on the boycott was not too successful. Around September of 1967, I found myself on a United Airlines flight back to California and back to the credit union.

Many strikers had gone back to work. They couldn't afford to be living on \$5 a week plus food, which consisted of beans and canned goods. These were items we received on a weekly basis (donated by groups in food caravans to Delano). Those who were lucky were helped by relatives who had jobs and who were not involved with the union. During this

period, many strikers lost their homes, their automobiles, their furniture, and their TVs because they couldn't keep up the payments. Marriages fell apart because of the financial struggles. Individuals within families became enemies because they were on opposite sides of the labor dispute. In some cases, family members stopped talking to each other because of their strong beliefs, either for or against the strike. In some cases involving married couples, there was a dispute between the wife and husband. Either the husband or the wife continued working while the other, as a protest, just stayed home. In many cases, Cesar was able to keep families together by continuously counseling them in terms of how important it was to keep the faith and continue with the struggle. He said that what we were doing would benefit all farmworkers. He said the struggle was difficult but we had a "cause" and everyone's participation was needed.

A year later, in 1968, we had a planning retreat at the Santa Barbara Mission in Santa Barbara. Most of the families still working in the union participated. At the retreat, we developed a plan to begin the nationwide boycott of California table grapes. We found that in order to get contracts, all the Kern County table grape growers would have to be targeted in the boycott. Families left in caravans to the various locations nationwide. We were assigned to Montreal in Quebec, Canada. I recall driving cross-country in a 1967 VW with my wife, Tillie, and Olivia, our only child at that time. We were assigned several "volunteers" who had been recruited from various colleges to assist us with the boycott. In some cases they were effective, while in other cases they were just a headache. We had three individuals assigned to us. By December of 1968, I was by myself in Montreal.

Our family found an apartment in East Montreal. East Montreal was, and probably still is, almost 100 percent French-speaking. We learned to communicate with the French-Canadians relatively easily because of the similarities between the French and Spanish languages.

In Montreal, I developed my public-speaking skills by speaking to groups, quite an accomplishment for me. I learned to move around the city, make contact with various groups: students, churches, labor, and other communities. I spoke to student organizations at universities. I spoke at union meetings and to church groups. One time, a reporter friend from the local English newspaper in Montreal, the *Montreal Gazette*, picked up my speech to a group of students regarding the effects of the boycott on the Delano growers, and put it out over the Associated Press. I learned later that my remarks were broadcast in the local television news in Delano. On many occasions, I found myself traveling to Quebec City, whose citizens spoke French, to promote the boycott of table grapes. We struggled, but we learned how to survive. More important, we learned how to work with people. We learned how to deal with the press, particularly reporters, who always try to put words into your mouth. By learning from Cesar speaking to the press, we learned how to direct the press interviews in our direction.

Tillie returned to Delano in late 1968. My best supporters arranged for me to travel to Delano for the Christmas holidays. While I was in Delano, I met with Cesar on several

occasions regarding several issues within the union. He made it a point to tell me that I should never have left Montreal (for Christmas) because others in the boycott would feel demoralized because they couldn't go home for the holidays too, and that he wanted me to stay in Delano for a while. My response was that supporters volunteered to pay for the flight and that if other boycotters did the same, they could go home too.

During my visit, Cesar told me not to go back "yet." Cesar and I worked on some immediate problems in the accounting department. He stated there was no accountability and no way to really know where the union stood financially. There were some financial statements, but they didn't reflect the true financial picture of the union. I later learned that this was the real reason he kept me in Delano. He needed someone he could trust with the union's finances. Apparently, I was that individual.

In mid-January of 1969, I flew back to Montreal but not to stay. I picked up my belongings and started my three-day drive back to Delano. I had been reassigned. That month, I became the controller of the UFW. The last position I held with the union until I left in August of 1971.

I did my job well. It was not easy working with Cesar. Cesar and I were the only ones signing checks for the union. It was my responsibility to screen all invoices, vouchers, etc., and make sure that when I took him the checks for signature, I could justify the expenditures. Many times I couldn't. Many times the disbursements were based on requests of other board members, requests that Cesar felt were not justified. On many occasions, I ended up picking up the checks, vouchers, and invoices off the floor. That's where he would throw them because he didn't agree with the disbursements. Needless to say, I wasn't very happy about it. However, I learned from that experience. I learned to prepare myself in case things didn't go the right way. I learned to have a Plan B just in case, and to look at alternatives.

I left the union in August of 1971. I often think back and look at the years of my life before and after I worked with the union. I joined as a very naïve, inexperienced young person, but learned and grew a lot during the time I was a part of it. I matured a lot. For a young person in his late 20s, I experienced a lot in that short period of my life. I traveled throughout the country, I organized groups for the boycott, I spoke to student groups at universities and to other local groups, I organized an accounting department and was responsible for the finances of an international union, and I did much more. There were the personal issues I dealt with too—my own and those of others who were impacted by the strike.

Occasionally, I sit and talk about my experience with my kids. All four are adults now and they can't believe I did all those things at that young age. I went from farmworker to a postal sorting clerk to being a part of a national movement, a movement to help farmworkers. I left a grown and mature individual. I grew intellectually from experiences in the union. More important, I learned about dedication. This I learned by being around

Cesar for so long and by having the determination to change things for the better. I could write a book on my experience with the union. I left with a tremendous amount of knowledge gained from my close association with Cesar.

I suppose all of us who were part of the union left with something in us. We learned to cope with losses, we learned to suffer, and we also learned that just because we had some success did not mean the struggle was over. Most of all, we learned that our pride, beliefs, and self-respect are our most important assets. We left with that feeling and we are very proud of it—maybe because no one can take it from us.