

## Joanne (Edelson) Honigman 1968

When anyone in the know learns that I worked for the farmworkers' union after graduating college, his or her first question is, "Did you know Cesar Chavez?" Yes, I did—though barely. As the union's representative at the service center for the Almaden Vineyards at Hollister, California, I was hundreds of miles from Delano, our union's center. I took my orders from Jose Luna, the plucky Chicano who directed our region. But on several occasions, I met with Cesar.

Before I was assigned to Hollister, I was asked to participate in a demonstration during one of Cesar's frequent fasts. Much like Gandhi, Cesar used fasts as a tactic to draw media attention to the plight of oppressed farmworkers, giving up all food and beverages (except water) for weeks. He would shrink down to a frail man who had to be carried from his bed on a stretcher to meet with the many famous politicians, like Robert F. Kennedy, who came to pay homage and champion our cause.

I can remember the night hundreds of us circled Cesar's house, holding lighted candles and singing sacred songs. It's a vivid memory that still jolts me. Wasn't it ironic for this slightly rebellious Jewish girl to march with coworkers, singing hymns to the Virgin and for a leader raised to the level of sainthood? Even in the annual retelling of our ancient exodus from Egypt in my own tradition, we barely mention our leader Moses, as a way of de-emphasizing individuals and stressing God's redemption. But here in Delano, Cesar was the man. He dedicated his life and abundant talents to ameliorating the farmworkers' struggle. Outside the concrete benefits obtained once a vineyard was finally unionized, Cesar generated a sense of community and pride that also improved the well-being of farmworkers.

I remember sitting in the living room in his modest house at a meeting, marveling how his wife, kids, relatives, and friends were also totally with him in *La Causa*. Yet he remained a gentle and accessible man, even when he was famous.

I got a lot of pleasure when I saw his warm smile on the face of a U.S. postage stamp last year.