

Maria Rifo 1968–1980

Remembering the United Farm Workers Union

In the Beginning

I met Cesar Chavez when I worked as a Vista volunteer in New Mexico in 1967. He came to persuade the farmworkers not to break the strike that was starting in California. His attitude and his calm manner inspired me to ask for a job with the union.

So when I finished the second year of the contract with Vista, I left for Delano, California. I came to the United Farm Workers mature in years but immature in other ways, without experience of life outside of home and without knowing how to communicate with people in power. I didn't want to lose the ideals that led me there in the first place, but I was not skilled at how to use power in order to maintain a positive attitude. In other words, I did not know what to do when doubts came up, and how to ask people in charge about it.

At the beginning of my stay, Cesar was patient and didn't give me very difficult tasks. At first, I was a receptionist in the house where he spent many months recuperating from his fast. His fasting helped redirect the farmworker movement from the wave of violence that was growing between the farmworkers and the owners. The workers had cultivated the vineyards and were the source of the prosperity and wealth of the owners. And now the farmworkers were on strike for better working conditions and honest, fair salaries so they could escape from the poverty that they and their families lived in.

Cesar's Vision

From the beginning, Cesar wanted to be sure that people understood the dream he had for the farmworker movement. He knew firsthand the needs of his fellow workers because as a child, he had to work as a migrant in order to help his father. His father had lost his own farm during the Depression. Cesar's dream was more than creating an association just to obtain better salaries. He dreamed that there could be a way to give the farmworkers another type of power—the power to be the real owners of their lives. This came from more than money; it came from developing their self-esteem and creating conditions so that they could advance on the ladder of society. This was Cesar's dream and the goal of the union.

My Work

Little by little, I started understanding and taking more control of the work I was given. At first I was Cesar's secretary, helping him with his Spanish correspondence. I also took care of whatever came up that needed attention around Cesar. For example, when a puppy was given to him, I was suddenly in charge of arranging food for the dog, which, without going into details, did not mean going to buy dog food.

Cesar never gave detailed directions about how to do the different tasks; he only assigned the task to the volunteers and each one had to find the way to carry it out and stay on top of things. This way of giving out responsibility enabled us to discover our own capability. It gave us the opportunity to grow. In this way Cesar shaped the minds and talents of the many people who worked with him. We awakened to other horizons, other visions; everyone grew up enormously in the way we worked.

My stay with the union was a transforming time for every part of my personality—mental, emotional, and physical. Being with the union, and especially with Chavez, forced me to look inside myself, to work hard to discover my abilities, abilities I never dreamed I possessed. While I was with the union, I discovered I was capable of doing everything that I was asked to do. I have continued to discover new qualities in myself even now, thanks to that experience.

Cesar encouraged me, in a positive way, not to feel the pressures of all the tasks that I was doing. For example, I translated legal contracts from English to Spanish without any training in the law and not understanding the Spanish/English spoken by the farmworkers.

I also wrote for the union newspaper, *El Malcriado*, and translated it into Spanish for the Latino community. One reason they asked me was that no one else could actually write in Spanish. However, it was the great trust they conveyed in me that inspired me to rise to the occasion.

Working to produce the newspaper was also new for me. I typed on a heavy machine to create a tape full of holes, which I passed to another machine that made the columns. Only then could I see what I had typed. Then I pasted and made up the newspaper sheet, and balanced the writing with the photographs, making a collage. I did this all myself before proofreading it (it is very hard to see one's own errors). Then we rushed the paper to the printer in Fresno so that we could get it back by noon. Because we were working all day and all night, the editor in charge kept falling asleep as he drove us, and I had to keep waking him so we could get there. Then, when the newspaper was ready, we had to deliver it, or label and send them out. Despite all this, it was so beautiful for me, because it was all so new. It was a huge job that I never in my life dreamed I could do. In the beginning I resisted, as I had no experience. But Cesar said, "Maria, you just do it," and I could. To me it was a big discovery: how to see the world in a bigger spectrum. I became aware of all the possibilities and aptitudes that existed in myself. For this I will be grateful for the rest of my days.

Learning the Unwritten Rules

Living on the union premises was simple for me because there were no written rules, only a balanced collective life to be happy and work happy. For instance, in order to leave the premises, you only had to tell the person at the entry point when you planned to come back.

I wasn't really aware of the degree of control that Cesar had over my work and the group that worked there, because he acted in such a freeing way, always giving us freedom to work as we wanted. However, a different picture came from an unpleasant incident in which I was involved.

The person in charge of the service center in Coachella, near the border of Mexico, invited me to go to work with her, because she needed additional help. I accepted the invitation, not knowing the unspoken rules. I left with my friend to go to Coachella. The next day, she received a phone call from Cesar. He ordered her to bring me back immediately, not even asking why I was there. Coming back, he didn't say anything to me, and I didn't give him any explanation because I felt quite innocent.

The episode was very painful for me because I love to volunteer to do things when I feel inside that this is what I need to follow. However, being under someone's authority is against my nature; I hate it. This was the first time that I recognized that Cesar had authority, rather than some ideal I had that everyone could just do their own thing. He gave us such free will to do things without any rules, which made me so happy. When I was told to come back from Coachella, I was shocked. It was like the difference between being treated like an adult and being treated like a child. In fact, being in Coachella wasn't good for me—the climate made me sick—but my independent nature really wanted to be consulted about it, rather than being ordered to do something.

At the time, I didn't say anything to anyone about this incident or how I felt. I was satisfied to work for a just cause. I let go of the disappointment and tried to forget it. And I tried to do nothing to bother other people.

The Beginning of the End

After about 12 years had passed, I took a vacation in Mexico with some friends. The travel was very positive for us, but it put me into a decline in my position in the union. I never knew why the change happened to my relationship with Cesar, but I noticed it immediately when I returned. I was assigned to work that isolated me from others. I was doing translation work for Cesar, for his preparation for the classes that he taught. I was never able to get any time with Cesar to talk about my situation there, however. In fact, he avoided any opportunity to meet me even casually. So soon after that, I left the work at the union and moved to Santa Rosa. I left feeling very happy to move on and fly with the new wings I had developed there.

What I Received

I can say without any disillusion or remorse that I received so much from Cesar's teachings and the time he spent telling me his ideals about the movement. I was able to recognize the entire range of what I am capable of doing. Nothing can darken that feeling. To me, it is the treasure of my whole life. Because of that treasure, I am happy, and I enjoy the inner happiness that the time there left me.

How Cesar Helped People to Find Their Own Power and Educate Them

I think that Cesar taught us by the way he told us to work. In this way he helped us to develop our own insight, our own gift, our own dreams, and our own ideas of what we could do. This insight gave us the desire to do more. I realized that all people, in little ways and big ones, grew a lot. For instance, the nurse who was in charge of Cesar's recuperation decided, after he was well, to go back to medical school. Now she is a famous doctor specializing in pesticides and working in the Bay Area. First she was working for the union filing complaints against owners for the poisons in the field. Now she is a doctor.

The volunteers were all visionary people. Many were 18 or 19 years old when they came. They didn't know what to do, but they wanted to do something. Cesar put some of them to work at the clinic with a doctor who worked in the same way that Cesar did. When someone came with an illness, the volunteers would tell the symptoms to the doctor. Then the doctor would tell the volunteers to go look in such and such a book and look it up. In that way, they learned to help people. This way, four of these volunteers later went to medical school and became doctors.

Another thing with Cesar was that he never said you did very well, and if you made a mistake, he also didn't say anything. He didn't put people down, or put people up. Though one time he did say, "We need more Marias!"

This is how he taught everybody ... Hispanic or Anglo ... because he would be sure that everyone had an experience of learning and working together.

Organized Education

One of the great ideas of Cesar was to have a school on the premises to teach the farmworkers how to manage their own union. He invited a dozen of the workers to live on the premises. They learned English intensively every morning, then came to the common volunteer dining room and mixed with the English-speaking volunteers to practice speaking with them. In the afternoon they had classes about organizing, negotiating, and managing contracts—and on other topics related to management of the union.

There was also language training. In those days my task was to teach Spanish to the Anglo volunteers. A man named Lozanoff had developed a method where you could learn any language just by having people relax, and listen to Spanish. Cesar found someone who taught science that way, and so that man came and taught us the system. Then we could teach Spanish that way, relaxing people first. We read to them twice, and then told them they have it already, you know it, you can speak it. I mixed that method with a method from a Brazilian teacher (Paola Frede) who had developed a system to teach writing, using big pictures with real-life experiences. I had met him in Chile after he was expelled from Brazil. So in my class I would have them write something about the history of the union, something simple. Then we would sketch it, and then the people would present it.

Cesar also sent the Anglo group to Baja California to learn more Spanish and so they could forge greater connections with the workers. They spent the mornings delivering water, food, and bread so they could get a better sense of the conditions. (They couldn't do this in California because the growers would have kicked them out. Anything related to the union was considered communist by the growers.) This was a great experience to be with them, and they returned very happy.

Taking Care of Older Farmworkers

On the Forty Acres in Delano, Cesar built a retirement house for the farmworkers, especially for the Filipinos. Mexicans were able to go back home after each season but the Filipinos could not. The Filipinos were contracted to come over, then given housing in barracks on the vineyards where they slept and ate, and they had to pay for this and didn't ever save enough money to go back to their families as they had planned. When they didn't have work, they lived in a cheap hotel and spent more money. So this is why Cesar built the retirement house. He wanted the union to be able to take care of the people after they could no longer work in the fields.

It was built with a long corridor, and a room and a little piece of land for each person where they could plant what they wanted to, such as vegetables, which they could sell or give to the kitchen. I lived there two or three years, and I had a little piece of land where I planted flowers.

In addition to building the retirement house, the union also put money away for each worker for their pension that they could claim when they were unable to work. Even to this day, there are still workers whom the union cannot locate, who have checks waiting for them. This pension, along with creating free medical clinics, was also part of the way Cesar created a system to help the farmworkers move out of the poverty system.

The Setting for the Union Premises

When Cesar first came to Delano, no one would rent anything to him, not even a house where people could live. He had to do it all through an Anglo friend. To buy land on the outskirts of Delano (Forty Acres) required the assistance of a friend. Same thing happened in La Paz, where a movie producer, Edie Lewis, bought it for them and the union paid it back.

Delano was divided by the tracks. On the eastside was the nuns' school and the Catholic church, and this place was for the rich people. On the other side of the tracks was the Virgin of Guadalupe, no school for children, just a priest who supported the poor and the union, and this is where the workers lived. Total division.