

Alfredo Vazquez 1968–1981

My name is Alfredo Ramirez Vazquez and I want to give thanks to God for giving me the opportunity to work as an organizer for 12 years and especially for the year and a half I spent as a bodyguard for Mr. Cesar Chavez.

First of all, I want you to know that the 12 years that I worked for the UFW were the best years of my entire life. There is much to tell about my time spent working as an organizer, but the year and a half I spent serving with Cesar day and night was an incredibly beautiful experience (*maravillosa*). Working with Cesar was very enjoyable. Cesar had a gift, *un don*, a wisdom that God gave him. He never lacked volunteers. Everyone wanted to work with him. Everyone knew that we had to work very hard, for many hours with very little pay, yet there was always an abundance of volunteers. A short workday, when working with Cesar was a 12- to 14-hour day. No one ever protested. Everyone was always willing, and ready for another day.

I began organizing with the farmworker union in 1968 and stayed until 1980 or 1981. My first job was in a field office in Wasco, organizing people in that area. Over the years I had many jobs or positions. While working in Coachella, I helped organize and lead a march. Two weeks before the grape harvest was ready, the workers were organized, ready to go on strike. The organization team made up of Jim Drake, Pablo Espinoza, Lupe Murguia, Roberto Bustos, and myself thought a march would be a good idea. We went to see Cesar for approval and guidance. We arrived in La Paz at 11 p.m. Cesar had many back problems after the first fast and took the meeting reclined on his bed. The meeting went until 1 a.m. The team discussed logistics and assignments on the five-hour trek back to Coachella and began meeting with workers first thing in the morning, as soon as we arrived. We had a week to plan and pulled off a memorable march from Coachella to Calexico, which marked the beginning the grape strike in the Imperial Valley.

Later I organized inside the ranches, as a submarine. During the time of the strike with Giumarra, I was the first to discover that Giumarra was selling his grapes under other growers' labels. The boycott was working and Giumarra couldn't sell his grapes under his own label. I was able to get proof that he was shipping with others' labels on his boxes. The discovery caused much excitement and happiness. I was very happy. I knew that my work was very important.

The following year, Cesar sent me to San Pedro in Southern California to work on the grape boycott. The boycott office was on Pacific Avenue, in the center of town. I had a huge area to cover. In addition to the grocery stores, we would picket the docks so that the grapes could not be shipped so easily. After that I worked in the Selma field office as a dispatcher, sending farmworkers to union jobs.

Then I went to Napa County with Jim Drake. By then the Christian Brothers Vineyards were organized and had a union contract. They were one of the first companies to sign

contracts. We organized a march from Napa to Sonoma, meeting other marchers from other areas like Salinas, where workers marched with Dolores Huerta. The purpose was to organize the Sonoma area wineries.

From Napa I was called to La Paz and was integrated into the small group of Cesar's bodyguards. This is when the job became dangerous. Threats had been made on Cesar's life. For me, working that closely with Cesar was an education of many good things.

Here is one example of the hours we would put in. Once, during a campaign for a proposition, we left Los Angeles at 7 a.m. We made stops at colleges all day to speak to students, beginning at Cal State Long Beach and ending with a meeting with farmworkers in Coachella. That same night we crossed the border and had a meeting that began at 11 p.m. with clinic staff in Mexicali. The union had a clinic in Mexico. After that final meeting we returned to Coachella to pick up some grapefruit donated by some workers and returned to La Paz just in time for Cesar's 7 a.m. meeting. We drove in two cars with two drivers per car.

This was something very special for me. Working close to Cesar day and night meant learning something new every day. From Cesar I learned how to forgive and how to share. It was a daily training and practice in honesty, among many other things. I cared for him very much, as a friend, as a teacher, and as a counselor. Sometimes during a long workday Cesar would take a 15-minute break and we would walk around La Paz, talking sometimes about things he had read about, such as Gandhi's life. To learn from Cesar one only had to watch him work, and notice the way in which he directed thousands of persons. Cesar had a wonderful gift from God. I'm not sure what to call it, but many special and good people came to offer their help.

Cesar cared deeply for all people, but children were always his major concern. When it was my turn to guard him at night, I would sleep on a mattress at the foot of his bed next to the door. One night I awoke at 2 or 2:30 in the morning. The light was on and Cesar was sitting on the bed. I asked if he was sick. He said no, he was praying for the children. He would sacrifice his precious sleep, he felt so compelled to plead for the well-being of the children of the world.

I loved Cesar, and when I was his bodyguard I would evaluate the value of his life verses mine. His life was so much more valuable than mine, even though I loved my life. His life's work was so valuable; it is why we were always in danger. I was always next to him, willing and ready to stop, if need be, a deadly bullet. The summer of 1972, when Cesar ended his fast, were the most dangerous days. The day he ended his fast was a very intense, stressful day. I was by his side, firm in my decision to protect him at all costs.

I chose to organize with Cesar Chavez's union because I knew of many injustices that ranchers did to workers. I wanted to improve the lives of *campesinos*. This is why I joined the union.

