

Kevin M. Brown 1969–1973

In 1968, a local Roman Catholic priest, Ron Loehner, took a bunch of people (mostly high school kids) from my hometown, Owosso, Michigan, down to the southwest part of the state, where migrant farmworkers come each year to pick pickles and strawberries. We were part of the Lansing Diocese's "Bishop's Committee for the Spanish Speaking" and we were there to perform community service. What we did was hand out free clothes, have dances, and, to our credit, help with daycare and night school for those who wanted their kids to get an education. I helped teach in the morning and drove the school bus at night. I learned how to speak (some) Spanish from the kids. I saw firsthand the squalor that farmers/growers forced those wonderful people to live in. I stayed with a family for a little while that was living in a 15-foot-square cabin. There were seven in that family. I also went to Corpus Christi, Texas, with another family that September for a couple of weeks. It was sweltering and I sat in front of a fan most of the time. We took a trip to San Antonio and I got to see the Alamo. That's how I spent the summer of 1968.

In 1969 I began a program at Lansing Community College, studying sociology. That first term I wrecked my car, so I decided to move to Lansing (30 miles from Owosso) so I wouldn't have to commute. As luck would have it, I moved in with the Kay family, whose son, Tom, was working with the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee's grape boycott. That second term at LCC, I spent more time on the picket line, knowing that farmworkers getting their own union was a much more effective way of getting out of the poverty they were forced to live in than the church's handouts. I learned "sociology" firsthand.

I dropped out of college and moved to Detroit to work on the boycott full time. I lived with the farmworker family that had come from California to run the boycott operations in Michigan. They were the Rangels: Hijinio, Luisa, Luis, Jose, Domingo, Tony, Maria Elena, Maria Margarita, and Maria Christina. We lived in a three-bedroom "walk-up" on West Grand Boulevard. Hijinio and Luisa had a bedroom and the boys and girls each shared a room. There were, at various times, several other people living there as well. I remember Kathy Zimmerman and Armando something. Hijinio called Tom Kay *Tomas Que Feo*. Heh.

I quickly found my niche in working with the unions of Detroit, since I had briefly been a member of the UAW and also the Retail Clerks, AFL-CIO back home. I tried to coordinate the participation in grocery store picket lines by the locals in conjunction with other groups (housewives, students, etc.) so that in the community we were in, there was a cross-section of the community participating in the boycott. I had the privilege and honor of attending the Memorial Service at COBO Hall for Walter Reuther and got to meet Roy, his brother, who had been in Russia for a long time. That is also the first time I met Cesar and Larry Itliong. Paul Schrade, the UAW's West Coast regional director and Robert F. Kennedy campaign coordinator, gave me his two passes since he was so recognizable and wouldn't need them. Another volunteer, Shirley Charbonneau, and I were chosen to represent the office.

I remember asking for an autograph from Cesar (by mail) and was sent the front cover of the calendar that the *El Malcriado* staff had put together. I found out later from Susan Drake, Cesar's assistant, that she had signed his autograph and that it was pretty common practice for someone in the office to do that. He was just too darn busy for such frivolity. I think I still have that autograph!

Daniel Valdez, brother of Luis (*Teatro Campesino*), who had a bit part in the movie *La Bamba*, came to town with his *Teatro Urbano*. I traveled around Michigan for a couple weeks, playing navigator.

One time while picketing the huge produce terminal, where the trucks would bring the produce from California and elsewhere to be sold to the local markets, a large Italian-looking man passed through our line and went into the office, only to come out with a "Tommy" submachine gun over his shoulder. He thought it would be funny to get in our picket line with us. Needless to say, we promptly left, and went to change our underwear! I remember another time when a group of us laid down in front of one of the semis carrying scab grapes. Boy, was that scary! Remember, the Teamsters were NOT supporting us!

I celebrated my 21st birthday at a bar around the corner from the office where occasionally I used to get a great hamburger for lunch. That day I had a beer with it! I went back to work.

In October of 1970, the Rangel family, Kathy Zimmerman, and I left for Delano in a donated school bus, to attend the "celebration" of the grape boycott success. We ended up instead, after dropping off the bus in Delano, in Watsonville to help with the lettuce strike already in progress.

While there, I was asked by Manuel, one of the bodyguards, to join the security staff because I was a big guy and young. We stayed at a neat little hillside "cabin" owned by a writer friend of Cesar's. It was pretty luxurious by farmworker standards! A memory I have of that stay was the pool down the hill at another house and the skinny dippers one night. This was a pretty scary time because the contact with the FBI informed us that a contract had been taken out on Cesar's life.

I forget the sequence of events and the chronology here now, but I also spent some time helping build the clinic in Delano. Cesar got hold of a couple of wooden army barracks that he put end to end with a space in between where we built the entrance and waiting room. The barracks were up off of the ground somewhat, but the middle section would be ground level. We put adobe brick on the outside and a tile roof on the whole thing, which meant the older buildings had to be reinforced to hold the weight. "Molly" Mallouf (a man), the contractor from Marin County who oversaw the construction, said it would have been cheaper in the long run to start from scratch. The cost of reinforcing the buildings was pretty high, I guess. I worked as a mason's assistant to a little old German man

(Emil?), who had “retired” in Baja California with his Mexican wife. He laid the bricks at one end of the clinic and a farmworker volunteer did the other end. They met in the back of the entryway, and it was obvious which end had been done by which bricklayer. The German’s was precise and plumb, straight as a line could be, whereas the volunteer’s end was a little more relaxed and casual, though perhaps it was stronger because he paid more attention to strength as opposed to aesthetics.

I also did some construction work on the North Unit at La Paz, mostly replacing windows that the local kids had broken over the years after the TB sanatorium closed and before the UFW bought the property. I also worked there as security for the property and again as bodyguard for Cesar.

I lived with Cesar for a while. I usually say “six months” when telling the story, but I don’t remember for sure how long I was actually there. Helen didn’t want to move from Delano until school was out or something (I don’t think she really ever wanted to move there), so I was asked to move in and be Cesar’s chief cook, bottle washer, and gate attendant. I remember that Dorothy Day from the Catholic Worker visited one night late and I had to go out in the rain with an umbrella to let her in the gate that surrounded Cesar’s house (8-foot cyclone fence), and she mentioned me by title in the article she wrote for her newspaper. Wish I still had the issue.

Cesar had other visitors during that time that I had the honor of meeting: Andrew Young, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, and Anthony Quinn, movie actor, who I was surprised to learn, spoke Spanish. The Italian socialist, Danilo Dolci, visited, and I think I remember Coretta Scott King also visiting. I left La Paz in 1971 for a while and returned to Michigan, where I got a job as a janitor at a hospital. I didn’t like it very much and missed my friends from the farmworker days very much, so I returned in June. That was a cross-country trip, which included hitchhiking almost the entire state of California on Memorial Day weekend of 1971, but I won’t bore y’all with that here!

I remember Cesar being concerned at one point when I was living with him about the contract that was still out, reportedly for \$50,000. His brother, Richard, was visiting. Cesar’s back was hurting real bad and Daneen Montoya was giving him a back rub. Cesar asked Richard if I was even armed and he told him I had a small handgun. Even though the rule of nonviolence was extremely important to Cesar, he understood the need for a prepared defense. An organization of “special friends” was loosely formed to buy some other equipment, so as not to use UFW or service center monies for this purpose. We had a jeep that we used to patrol the property.

I learned a lot while staying with Cesar, including all about macrobiotic diets, as I had to learn to cook for him, too. On New Year’s Eve he let the guards go out of the dining hall where we were having our party and shoot off our guns. Lupe Murguia’s was an old handgun that wouldn’t shoot. Cesar also turned me into a “*pachuco*,” telling me to say,

“Dame otra tequila, carnal!” He had a great sense of humor and an evil little smile when he was playing tricks on people.

I had the privilege, after moving into the hospital unit, of taking charge of Huelga, one of Cesar’s German shepherds. He was basically my responsibility and I was to work with him and keep him sharp on his attack commands. Boycott stayed with Cesar, as did Max, the original family shepherd from Delano, who had serious back and hip problems and was not very friendly. Max and I became pretty good buddies, and I was one of the few people outside of the family who could get him to do anything. I remember Cesar telling a story of Larry Itliong, UFW vice president, who visited the Delano house one time. Max got hold of him from the rear of his pants, and Larry turned around and said, “What’sa’ matta’ brotha? What did I do to you?”

I’m afraid I don’t remember much more about my time with the Huelga and the wonderful Chavez family and staff, but I’m sure I’ll remember a bunch when I’ve sent this off.

Daneen Montoya had already left and gotten a job with the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) in San Jose and helped me get a job there as well. I remember Cesar didn’t take too kindly to the volunteers who left. He felt as though we should all have the lifetime commitment that he had. Sometimes I wonder how my life would be different if I had been able to mature more quickly and figure out how much I would miss this life later. I jokingly tell people that I had to have a stomach and tongue transplant and that the only ones available had belonged to a Mexican. This is why I speak Spanish so well and why I love the food and the people!