

Jim Cassell 1969, 1971–1976

I was born in La Jolla, California, in 1945, when it was a small coastal community. My mother remarried in 1955 and we moved to the San Francisco Peninsula, where I finished high school. As our family grew in the mid-1950s and 60s, so did the involvement of both of my parents, Vicky and Reverend Frank Plaisted, in a number of great social causes of that era.

My stepfather was with the Migrant Ministry. I had finished my first year of college in 1965, and my parents encouraged me to join the UFW march from Delano to Sacramento, which was my first introduction to the farmworkers.

After serving in the navy during the Vietnam War (which I was against), I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. In 1969 I dropped out of San Francisco State University (not seeing my future in academia) and became a part-time longshoreman on the docks of San Francisco. My parents asked me if I wanted to help out on the boycott that was headed by Kathy and Lupe Murguia. Dolores Huerta and family were also living on Folsom Street in San Francisco, where I first met them. Kathy and Lupe were like family, as were the rest of the volunteers (Jan Peterson, Eddie Razo, and others). Also, 1969 was a heady time for the UFW, with the international Boycott Safeway Day, strikes in the fields, and a march to Calexico through the searing heat of the desert for two weeks. It was kind of like being in a war zone without casualties. We were all so passionate and dedicated to *La Causa*.

I also remember one week prior to international Boycott Safeway Day. Phil Gerbode, a volunteer from one of San Francisco's most prominent families, and I were driving through the Haight Ashbury district, announcing the big demonstration day at Safeway from the loudspeakers attached to the roof of the car, when we were pulled over and arrested by the police. (I found out later that the week before, the Black Panthers had been using loudspeakers on top of cars shouting obscenities at the cops, so they were really pissed.) We were put into the local jail and then transferred downtown, where we spent the next 12 hours in a large holding tank. While we were there, the "*Siete de La Raza*" suspects came into our cell, having just been arrested. These seven Latino teenagers were from San Francisco's Mission district and were accused of killing a policeman. This was a highly publicized case in all the newspapers. The kids were nice to us in jail, but I had the impression that one or two of them might have been guilty.

On the boycott I also was working with musicians to help *La Causa*. We contacted a fairly new band named Santana, whose first record had just come out, and got them committed to doing a benefit at the Fillmore auditorium. I worked with Bill Graham and we put together a very successful show on October 1, 1969, with other bands as well (Mike Bloomfield, Martin Fierro). The artist Lee Conkin, who had designed Santana's LP and many famous Fillmore posters, did the poster for us. It's a classic today.

After the year of work on the boycott and the concert, I decided to work full time as a longshoreman to make some money and travel the world. During the end of 1969 and into 1970 I worked in a fish cannery, picked apples, picked cherries, lived in Mexico, and ended the year living with friends in Hawaii. I was in my mid-20s and had come to a kind of standstill in my life because I didn't know what I really wanted to dedicate myself to. I had traveled and worked at various interesting jobs but was a little lost in predicting my future. My mom had sent me a book by photographer Jon Lewis, and I was so moved by the story and mainly the great and moving photos of the farmworkers and their struggle. Photographs really do say a thousand words and feelings. This book helped me decide that I wanted to work full time and make a real commitment to the UFW.

I came back to California and traveled to La Paz where I helped with the painting. My old friends Lupe and Kathy Murguia were the caretakers there.

I had a meeting in Delano with Cesar at Forty Acres to find out what my assignment was to be (I had wanted to be a photographer) and was quite nervous to be meeting with him. He told me he had a commitment from Joan Baez to do a benefit and wanted me to put it together in the San Francisco Bay Area.

From that point forward, I asked a million questions about how to produce a large outdoor show and not let anything stop me. I picked the site: the San Jose State University Spartan football stadium. We had a beautiful large poster made and titled the event "Fiesta Campesina" with Joan Baez, the Steve Miller Band, Cal Tjader (Latin-jazz), Teatro de la Gente, Bola Sete, and mariachis. I had so much help with donated materials and time from graphic artists, printing trades, and even the Teamsters, who donated two flatbed trailers we used as the stage. Cesar and his wife, Helen, and some of their kids were there to sell tickets and Cesar would speak. It was a grand success and the beginning of my doing many more benefits.

I was on call from then on with various boycotts in California and Arizona that wanted benefits produced in their area. These shows raised thousands of dollars and created a lot of awareness for *La Causa*. The union leaders were able to speak as well.

During the period, 1971 to 1976, there were many benefits I produced—from 500 to 15,000 people. One show was a huge poetry benefit at the longshoreman's hall in San Francisco with Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and some great jazz artists. Others had Jerry Garcia, Cheech and Chong, Little Joe y la Familia, Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge, Malo (Jorge Santana), Tower of Power, David Crosby/ Graham Nash, Taj Mahal, Luis Gasca, Joan Baez, Azteca with Pete and Sheila Escovedo and many, many more.

This was an era when famous and not-so-famous artists gave of themselves, sometimes doing numerous shows. Sometimes they even paid their own band's travel expenses. Unions, poster designers, and other volunteers donated many, many hours of hard work.

We were all working for a great cause, and the performers believed us when they found out we were living on \$10 a week and \$15 for food plus rent, etc. It took a lot of persuasion and work to get artists to do benefits, but they could see that we were all very committed and sincere.

Many beautiful posters were produced from this era; they are in the UFW archives today.

One of the great things I learned from working for the UFW was that the passion and belief in *La Causa* can help you accomplish almost anything. The *si se puede* attitude abounds. You just go and do it. I never told myself that something could not be accomplished—I just went for it.

Also, what I thought was really a treasure is how all of the UFW volunteers were like one big family and you always had a place to stay and eat or sleep around the country, wherever it was. The food was all shared and gratefully accepted.

The many benefits were accomplished through persistence and hard work and the great belief in *La Causa*. The shows did have a budget but mostly ran on everybody's efforts.

I feel that working with the union was one of the finest times in my life. It was a unique experience of major growth that influenced who I am today. I would like to feel that I did make a difference in this world. Today, I have my own business managing and booking jazz, Latin-jazz, and blues artists.