Harriet Teller 1970–1973

Starting on Union Street

Lovingly dedicated in memory of my parents, Nat and Jeanette Teller

For as long as I can remember, my parents were active in a number of nonprofit organizations. Growing up in Flushing, New York, I was accustomed to seeing my father go to meetings, edit newsletters, and organize events on behalf of the teachers' union, his lodge, and our synagogue. Similarly, I was used to watching my mother volunteer with the March of Dimes and Hadassah, as well as the PTA of P.S. 24, the neighborhood public school I attended. I often accompanied her as she went door to door in our apartment building on Union Street to raise funds for these organizations.

It never occurred to me as a child that not every family operated in this manner. My brother, Alan, and I delighted in the abbreviations for the various organizations to which our parents belonged. (The NYSVPAA was a particular favorite.) The folding bridge table my father obtained by redeeming Raleigh coupons when he still smoked was put to good use during the committee meetings he ran from time to time in our apartment. I remember one committee member, Bertha Brenner, who used to send us feathers when she would go off on one of her bird-watching trips.

I doubt that I realized it at the time, but the example my parents set really laid the foundation for my brother's and my involvement in the community ourselves. It was only natural that like them, we would get involved in organizations that reflected our beliefs and values and volunteer our time and energy.

During the summer of 1969, following my sophomore year at the University of Michigan, I set off on a four-month journey through Europe and Israel, where I worked in the Golan Heights on a moshav, or collective farm. My job was in the gan yerek, the vegetable garden, grading onions. The work was difficult but fulfilling. I decided not to return to classes at the university.

That fall, I took a semester away from the campus in Ann Arbor and went to work for a federally funded agency, the United Migrants for Opportunity, Inc., in Saginaw, along with a college friend, Nina Samuels.

During the day we functioned as caseworkers, visiting migrant labor camps and helping workers deal with a wide range of problems. My high-school Spanish served me well in this job, as I was often called on to interpret for Mexican-American workers trying to navigate through bureaucratic procedures. At night, Nina and I served as teachers in an adult education program. I stayed in touch with my college professors and completed the requirements for an independent study program, turning in a paper documenting my

experiences in Saginaw, along with a series of photographs I had taken of children in the labor camps.

While on the job at UMOI, I had begun to detect a flaw in the philosophy of the program. A large part of our job was to convince the farmworkers to leave the migrant stream and settle down in the area. In the fall of 1969, experienced workers were already being laid off by the foundries and factories dominating Saginaw. What possible chance of employment could there be for an unskilled worker with little or no formal education, especially one who was not fluent in English?

I thought about my own family's experience coming to this country. My grandfather, Lou Teller, had been a garment worker by day and an entertainer at night. He was a charter member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). My father, Nat Teller, in turn, joined the United Federation of Teachers and helped to organize the vocational teachers in New York City. Somehow the idea of unionizing seemed to make more sense than the Band-Aid approach of the poverty program.

Of course, just as this idea was occurring to me, the United Farm Workers were making great strides organizing grape workers in California. I volunteered to work full time for the UFW for the summer, agreeing to the room, board, and $5 a week offered. I looked forward to being part of a movement with a future. I received a phone call one day from the UFW headquarters in California regarding my application. "We were about to assign you to the grape boycott staff in Detroit," a cheerful voice began. "But now we see that you want to go to California or Arizona. Maybe we can find something in between for you."

By then I was committed to the cause and agreed to the shift in plans. A few days later, a letter arrived with the greeting, "*Bienvenidos a Filadelfia*!" Welcome to Philadelphia.

I began work on June 6, 1970, joining a team led by one of the union's international officers, the great Gilbert Padilla. It was an unbelievably exciting time to be part of the campaign. After the grape workers of Delano, California had been on strike for five years, the consumer boycott organized on their behalf was coming to a successful conclusion. I spent the summer living in a row house rented by the union in a rundown neighborhood of Philadelphia, along with Gilbert and his family, Hope Lopez and her sons, Doug Adair, Lenore Glaser, Tom Dalzell, Steve Burrell, Lilli Sprintz, Carol Romero, Evans Garcia, and others. The spirit of victory was contagious. At the end of the summer, as the union celebrated the first labor contracts for the grape workers, I made the decision not to return to classes at the University of Michigan, and stayed on in the house on Mascher Street.

After the success of the grape boycott, the UFW turned its attention to the lettuce workers of California's Salinas Valley. Along with one other staff member, Doug Adair, I was sent to St. Louis in March of 1971 to organize local support for the lettuce boycott. We brought with us the name of a contact person we were to call when we got into the city. Unfortunately, she was not home when we arrived in town. Her teen-aged daughter hung

up immediately after informing us that "Mom's not here now." Luckily, I remembered two friends from the University of Michigan who were working in St. Louis as VISTA volunteers. They were home and invited us to stay with them until we could reach our contact person. I remained in St. Louis for a year and a half, organizing committees in support of the farmworkers. We developed a newsletter for supporters entitled "What's Ahead: News of the Lettuce Boycott" and produced a weekly show on the local public radio station.

At one point, we had the responsibility of organizing a meeting of the midwestern staff. People traveled to St. Louis from throughout the area and a few made the trip from California, including Cesar himself. He seemed impressed with the surroundings, a retreat center out in the country provided free of charge by the Christian Brothers. "We're organizers," he said to the assembled union staff. "We like to put things together."

For years California had held an appeal for me. In late 1972, I headed west and joined the UFW legal department as an investigator. For the next year and a half, I lived out of a suitcase, traveling up and down the state. With other members of the legal department, led by the union's general counsel, Jerry Cohen, I investigated allegations of abuse and reported our findings to the appropriate government agencies and media contacts. Our research on one project led to California state assembly hearings resulting in the banning of the pesticide Monitor 4.

During the spring and summer of 1973, as the original three-year contracts with the grape growers signed in 1970 expired, thing began to heat up. The Teamsters, who had a less-than-friendly history with the UFW, secretly signed contracts with almost all of the grape growers. Strikes broke out all over the state, with thousands of workers forming massive picket lines outside the ranches in the area. Injunctions against picketing were issued and defied, resulting in hundreds of arrests each day. The jails were filled, and those of us in the legal department worked day and night to keep up with the situation. We continued to take declarations from workers, often in Spanish, documenting the threats and the violence.

"Five-foot-tall Harriet Teller, twenty three, who is on the scene as a legal aide to the union, is pushed with a police club and maced as she tries to take a picture."

-- *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* by Jacques Levy, page 498

My sons, David and Ben, now 24 and 21 years old, find it interesting that their mother is mentioned in a book about a labor union and want to know what it feels like to be maced. I have a hard time believing that it all took place 30 years ago. The memories are so vivid to me that I do not need to turn on my videotape of *Fighting for Our Lives,* the film documenting that volatile time, to hear the voices of the strikers or to see the faces of the Teamsters on the other side of the picket line.

I was in San Francisco in December of 1973, researching water rights, when I received the call from my mother saying that my father had suffered a heart attack. I flew back to New York to be with my family. For a number of reasons, I had been considering leaving the UFW, and this certainly was the right moment to do it. I will always be proud of the chance I had to be part of such a historic movement.

After leaving the UFW, I stayed in New York, where I accepted a position with Frontlash, a labor-supported organization designed to increase voter participation by youth. I then went to work at the A. Philip Randolph Institute, helping to coordinate activities by the 150 affiliates of the minority labor organization throughout the nation. The president of the institute was Bayard Rustin, who had been the major organizer of the 1963 civil rights March on Washington, and was a true source of inspiration. He was an advocate of building bridges between communities, an idea not always in vogue.

I moved on to another historic effort, that of the J. P. Stevens workers in 1975. Stevens, the second largest textile manufacturer in the U.S., had a well-deserved reputation as an anti-union company determined to keep the union out at all costs. For four years I worked as the national field director of the union label department of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, supervising a total of 30 staff members across the U. S. and Canada. The consumer boycott we organized of Stevens products, along with the courage and strength of the Southern textile workers, helped to bring the company into the 20th century. The Stevens workers gained union representation and a measure of dignity in their lives. Unfortunately, the company has closed its plants in recent years. The last mill in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, was shut down this past year.

While working on the J. P. Stevens campaign, I met a red-headed trade unionist named Abe Goldman. We soon discovered that we shared more than a background in the labor movement, and fell deeply and hopelessly in love. We were married in New York on August 7, 1977. I continued to work at the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union until May of 1979, when our son David was born. Having worked at an extremely demanding job for so many years, I decided to take an extended maternity leave. Three years later, our son Ben was born. My time was now spent less on the picket line and more on the playground.

In 1987, I decided to complete the bachelor's degree I had begun 20 years earlier. With 85 credits from the University of Michigan and a fierce loyalty to the school, it had always been clear to me that if I were to obtain a degree, it could only be from Michigan. I was able to complete the required credits through a combination of summers in Ann Arbor and additional classes at the New School for Social Research and Brooklyn College during the fall and summer. In 1990 Abe, David, Ben, and I made the move from New York to Ann Arbor on a permanent basis.

I was working at the University of Michigan's public radio station when Cesar died. The station's news director, remembering that I had worked for the UFW 20 years earlier, asked me to write a brief piece he could feature in the afternoon news that day. He gave me 15

minutes to draft it and then had me read it on air. My two-minute eulogy included the following lines:

"Cesar has been hailed as a labor leader, a proponent of nonviolence, and a role model for Hispanic youth. All of this is true, but I will remember him first and foremost as an organizer, someone who knew how to talk to people and let them know just how much they mattered. More than almost anyone else, I believe, Cesar taught us that our own actions can change the world. One person not buying grapes could make a difference. One person standing up to injustice could be a powerful force.

"I remember him entering a room with his entourage. Flanked by his bodyguards, often including a beefy son-in-law or two, and his dogs Huelga and Boycott, he sometimes seemed larger than life. But once he sat down and began to speak, he was down to earth and sensible. During the 1973 strikes throughout California, I watched him address workers on the picket lines and at union rallies, calmly explaining his vision of justice for farmworkers. It was the same calm tone that he used to urge urban audiences to support the cause."

The people who joined the cause helped to contribute to the development of the union, as explained once by Cesar himself: "If we were nothing but farmworkers in the union now, just Mexican farmworkers, we'd only have about 30 percent of all the ideas that we have. There would be no cross-fertilization, no growing. It's beautiful to work with other groups, other ideas, and other customs. It's like the wood is laminated."

Based on conditions they saw firsthand, some of the former UFW volunteers concluded that they could best have an impact by seeking further professional training. There is now an extensive network of lawyers, doctors, nurses, and teachers who were inspired by the farmworkers. Maintaining the ideals that originally drew us to the union, many of us have built on our UFW experience while working with other organizations.

Throughout my own professional life, I have continued to use the skills I developed during my time with the farmworker movement: running meetings, organizing special events, raising funds, and producing printed materials, among others. After earning my bachelor's degree, I went on to complete a master's degree at the University of Michigan in 1997, and now work in development at the university's library, building support from alumni and members of the community.

It may seem like a long way from Union Street in Flushing, New York, where I grew up, through Philadelphia, St. Louis, California, and now Michigan, but I believe the path I have followed has been a pretty direct one, considering the values first instilled in me by my parents. My husband, Abe, and I are proud of our sons, David and Ben, who in their own ways have carried on the family tradition of community involvement. *Viva la Causa*!