

## Joanne Carder 1970–1974

### The Salinas Service Center 1970-1974

Five weeks after the birth of our daughter, Sara, my former husband, Bill Carder, and I moved from Washington, D.C. to Delano, California. Bill had been an attorney for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and I had been working as a legislative assistant on Capitol Hill for a California congressman. We had been following the grape strikes and participating in the boycott and decided, as native Californians, to return to our home state to help in the effort to gain union recognition for the UFW workers. We arrived in Delano in early March of 1970 and moved into a house a few doors up the street from Cesar. Our house quickly became a hubbub of activity. Cesar did not have a working telephone in his home and we assumed the responsibility for taking messages and delivering them to him, as well as to his family. I cannot remember why he did not have a working telephone and can only speculate that it must have been a nuisance to him. A non-working telephone did become an issue for me when I later ran the Salinas Service Center.

Although we thought we would spend our time with the UFW in Delano, as a labor attorney, Bill was told he was needed in Salinas where UFW workers were battling the lettuce growers, as well as the Teamsters union. By the summer of 1970, we had permanently moved to Salinas and for several months lived at the Downtowner Motel before finding an apartment in a public housing unit on Rosarita Drive behind the rodeo grounds.

Salinas seemed like a small town in 1970, but it was historical place. John Steinbeck had been born there and his family home was maintained as a historic landmark—ironically, by the local Junior League. Despite Steinbeck's fame as a novelist sympathetic to the labor movement and a library bearing his name, the general population of Salinas did not take kindly to the UFW and its followers. Besides some of the homes of UFW members, there were only a couple of places where most of us felt comfortable—a local Mexican restaurant and the union service center.

The service center really started out just as the local hiring hall for UFW workers. The hall had once been a grocery store, and it was a place where everyone congregated to gather information, share frustrations, and meet visiting personalities and people from all over the country. As the UFW focused more time on the lettuce organizing efforts, local and national newspaper and television reporters often dropped by the hall to interview UFW staff. If Cesar was in town, the hiring hall became his home base where he gave his speeches or met informally with the workers. However, even more frequently than Cesar, Dolores Huerta was in town and spent entire days at the hall meeting with workers and discussing legal and labor strategies with union organizers.

As the hiring hall grew more popular and a place where UFW workers congregated, it also became a place where workers could get advice and assistance. The service center evolved

as a resource for workers and UFW sympathizers. As *la esposa del abogado* (the wife of the lawyer), I found myself initially volunteering to help bridge the language barrier. Many of the workers and their families did not speak English. If they bought a watch, for example, and found it did not work, they had a problem taking it back and providing an explanation. In a short period of time, I was not just dealing with local merchants on their behalf but providing other services. With the help of a woman by the name of Gloria, who was the wife of one of the UFW organizers, we began to assist workers with initiating immigration proceedings, preparing taxes, and filing for divorce. Gloria and I coordinated with a local clinic to provide health services to the workers. We drew a lot of heated controversy when we began representing workers who had been injured on the job before the local workers' compensation appeals board. The local bar association received complaints from the growers' insurance companies when we fought to obtain lost wages for time out of work due to injuries.

When Gloria and I were not taking care of the workers' personal issues, we often helped run the hiring hall. After a period of time, the UFW now had a contract with Interharvest, a subsidiary of United Fruit, to harvest the lettuce. During the harvest season many workers were needed to cut and package the lettuce. However, we had a problem with the telephone. The phone bill had not been paid, and as a result the hall could not receive incoming calls or make outgoing calls. The manager of the hiring hall was afraid to call Cesar's office and ask for money to pay the bill. He had tried in the past and seemed to be ignored. By this time representatives from Interharvest had become irritated. They needed the workers in the fields. They came to the hiring hall and demanded that we find a way to ensure the union would be able to refer workers each day to the fields as they were needed. I think this was the only time in my four years with the union when I became angry. There was no reason why the phone bill could not be paid on time so that we had direct communication with the growers. I called Cesar at his office in La Paz where he was now living and asked that the bill be paid. Although I sensed some irritation on the other end of the telephone from one of Cesar's assistants, the phone bill was paid that day.

In early 1974 we left the union to move to San Francisco where Bill established his labor practice. From time to time we would drive to Salinas and visit the workers and spend time at the service center. The center continued to provide assistance to workers with many new volunteers there to expand the services Gloria and I started four years earlier.