

Kathy (Olguin) Smoot 1970–1974

La Paz

We were the eighth and ninth adults to move to La Paz. In the fall of 1970, we felt a bit of culture shock coming to this idyllic, peaceful place from the frenetic last months of the grape boycott and the intense and sometimes bloody struggle for contracts in the Salinas Valley. With the victories in the fields, cities, and at the bargaining tables, farmworkers were facing many new challenges: how to understand and administer their contracts, how to use their RFK Medical Plan, and how to help their *companeros* remain strong in Gandhi's teachings of nonviolence in the face of ever-increasing repression that was not limited to the fields.

It was our mission, those few of us, to begin the transformation of that old hospital into *Nuestra Señora de La Paz*! Yes, it was very quiet that first fall and winter (well, except for the trains, though they mostly came at night). But our little community kept on growing. By year's end we were about a dozen. A year later we would be 10 times as many or more.

I chose to write about my three and a half years at La Paz instead of the boycott or the Salinas strike (though I do have a few stories to tell from those times, as well) because it was such a unique experience. I feel privileged to have been part of it, to have met and worked among so many incredible people, *campesinos* and city folk, from all over the country and some from other countries. There may have been some in the movement who feared we would become isolated from the struggle, living up in the mountains. But this was no hippie commune, regardless of the long hair and beards. Farmworkers began to come for weekend conferences, seminars, and other meetings. The struggle was alive and thriving there; one couldn't help but be connected.

Well, I apologize, but this old memory is not able to retrieve as well as I had hoped. Some of the "whens" and "whos" are a bit obscure. So please don't take offense if I get something a little wrong ... or if I have forgotten your first or last name, or those of your children.

While Venustiano and Andy Zermeno worked in those early months to create the various educational pamphlets that were needed, I worked with Kathy and Lupe Murguia and Mike Krakow doing a combination of facilities maintenance and renovation, and hospitality preparations. (Yeah, it was a stretch to come up with those!) A cook arrived, and a landscape architect. The kitchen needed to be opened for conferences and volunteers, and the grounds had not been kept up for ages and needed a new plan. Ernie and his motorcycle came from Maine, and Tamar, V and I knew from the Bay Area Boycott. They arrived separately and later left together. During 1971 there were many groups, *Venceremos* Brigades, MECHAs, unions and churches, and others who would come to paint, plant, rewire, and re-plumb.

Some friends from Oakland gave V and me a puppy that winter. We named her Tripper. In the mornings, before work, we could often watch Cesar in his yard taking Boycott and Huelga through their paces. This gave V the idea to train our dog. He obtained a book, and soon there were three dogs in morning exercises. Tripper could go just about anywhere with us. She would lay quietly while we worked or were in meetings. She would stay unfenced in our yard when commanded and didn't bark at folks or chase cars. She was excellent with children, which was a very good thing, since our community would explode with them over the next two years.

Union membership was growing. There was tons of information to be dealt with. Dave and Kris Smith came to tackle that challenge. Other technically savvy volunteers also set their careers on the back burner to join them. The Smiths' cabin didn't have a kitchen, so we decided to have our meals together, and soon Pete Cohen joined our "meal co-op." It worked out quite well, and we continued until the kitchen opened full time (I think that was sometime in 1972). The rest of the houses, duplexes, and cabins filled up quickly, and people were making "homes" in the hospital wards. Sometime that spring the Chatfields moved into the other half of our duplex. In May Raymundo Murguia was born, the first of many. (Does anybody remember the "year of the Amy's?") I was expecting Javier. A community garden had begun. Many climbed the mountain in our backyard or went up to Tehachapi Mountain Park for a hike and picnic. Someone discovered Sam's Pizza Boat in Bakersfield, which had apparently been there for a while. (In fact, there was more than one.)

In October of 1971 farmworkers' enemies threatened them from the state senate. A bill had been introduced and was due to be voted on that would codify their exclusion from coverage under the CLRB. Many from La Paz went to L.A. to join the statewide campaign to persuade lawmakers to vote the bill down. Being very pregnant, I was happy to take on some office work, and enjoyed celebrating my 21st birthday in the heat of the struggle. Someone put 21 braids in my hair that night, and I think we had cupcakes. The bill was defeated. Javier was born on November 5, 1971, in Tehachapi, and a year later we'd be back in L.A. to campaign for Proposition 22, which would codify farmworkers' inclusion in the CLRB. It would pass!

In the year between those two victories, the struggle in the fields remained intense. The movie *Huelga!* was in the making, and *El Malcriado* was back in publication. Phase one of the mobile homes began to develop. Families moved in as their units became ready. But for each family that moved out of the hospital, it seemed that two would arrive. Phase two was ordered, and the kitchen was opened, and this helped to ease our growing pains, but not those in the fields.

Since Salinas, the Teamsters had been used by the growers to undermine the union. A tactic being used in Arizona and elsewhere was to back a "rival" union and bait UFW members into violence. Cesar went to Phoenix and started to fast. Eventually, media

coverage, and probably some arm-twisting by our trade union friends, caused them to back off. But they remained the proverbial thorn in the side.

I caught a ride with Barbara Cook to Phoenix. We weren't going to miss the celebration as Cesar ended his fast! So we set off across the high desert late at night to avoid the heat, two women, three kids, a dog, and a thermos of very hot coffee. Of course I burned myself trying to pour some for us while going through that really strange hilly area a ways out of Mojave. What we needed was iced coffee. We drove the whole way with the windows down, it was so hot. Coming into Phoenix a little after dawn, it was already 100 degrees. Now, I grew up in Sacramento, where it gets hot, but this was more than hot! V had found some people who would take us (including Tripper) in for a few days. She didn't seem to mind being left during the days, although she wasn't really used to it. When it came time to leave, we couldn't find her. Our hosts helped us canvas their neighborhood for a couple of hours, getting the word out about her. Eventually we had to leave without her. It was a very long, sad ride back to La Paz.

I know there are saints and angels. Some of them live in a little neighborhood between Phoenix and Tempe. They found Tripper and got her back to some union folks who were still there. I don't remember any details, but somehow Tripper got the hiatus of a dog's life, as she joined her buddies Boycott and Huelga wherever Cesar was recovering. Soon after we arrived home, someone let us know she had been found, but she didn't come home for a couple of weeks. "Tripper's Vacation with Boycott and Huelga" could be an interesting story.

My own role had been evolving into more of a resident childcare provider, which was fine with me for a while. But it wasn't a real solution. We needed a childcare center. La Casa de los Niños started with some donated playground equipment that was set up in a big sandbox. We found that some space in the hospital basement could be developed into a pretty good place for the kids. It was between two wings and had a large outdoor area easily accessible for play. We did the best we could, trying some cooperative daycare and other arrangements, but it would be into the next year before the right people came to solve that problem. Word got out, and our needs were answered. Yes, Gandhi tried to help us understand patience.

With a childcare center available, I could take on another challenge. El Taller Grafico had been moved from Forty Acres, and needed some attention. A metal hut at the main gate was a great place for visitors to pick up posters, buttons, bumper stickers, and books. When the new building was ready, we moved in along with some offset presses and the newspaper production. In the spring of 1973, Javier and I went to Michoacan with his abuelos to visit family. Someone else took over El Taller while I was gone, and when I returned, my perspective had begun to change.

We moved into our unit in Phase Two. I knew I had to go back to school and get a degree. It seemed to be the best way I could contribute in the long run. I was sure it would be

either in health care or education, and Bakersfield State was close by. My parents were able to pay for books and fees, but I would need transportation and childcare. V was often away covering stories or distributing the paper, so I needed a little backup. I met with Cesar. He knew how important the degrees and licenses were when it came to establishing schools and clinics. He smiled and said if I needed anything else to let him know. I completed a year at Bakersfield State. Javier went to La Casa, with all the niños. I never missed a class for lack of transportation. There was always a car, someone's car. For a week or so I drove a Spider up and down the hill. That was a gas!

I didn't let Cesar down either. I had a 4.0 GPA that year. I was deciding on a summer class and planning for the fall when V told me he needed a break. I was a little stunned. I had recently planted an apple and a pear tree in our "backyard." I wonder if they still grow there now. We had said good-byes to many over those years, going off to the Lettuce Boycott or back to their homes and jobs and communities. It never occurred to me that the time would come for our family to leave. How naïve we are in youth.

That summer Javier and I gathered ojas in the date orchards, while V handled the irrigation system. It was the hardest work I'd ever done.