

Daniel Ybarra 1970–1984

Arizona Recall Stories

People Who Made the UFW Arizona Recall Campaign Memorable

Adela Serrano, Ruben Alaniz, Juan Gomez, Johnny Armenta, Maria Armenta, Ted Caldes, Jimmy Caldes, Maria Caldes, Louise Caldes, Barbara Abeytia, Benny Abeytia, Earl Catano (great pool player), Carlos Chacon, Bobbie Stuart, Jack Duke, Roland Sharp, Big Frank Rodriguez, Hazel Washburn (the best), Scott Washburn, Zoe Washburn, Nancy Martinez, Richard Cook, Barbara Cook, Jim Drake, Vivian Levine, Father Joe Tobin, Sally Withers, Margo Cowan, Mary Kane, the Rubinettes, Carolina Rosales, Nellie Soto, Ray Solarez, Alfredo Vazquez, Mary Mahoney, Barry Kirchner, Sister Rachel, Bob and Avelina Corriell, Tina Rutkowski, Jim Rutkowski, Tony Omer, Gus Gutierrez, Rickie Gutierrez, Bill Soltero, Jan Peterson, Bruce Myerson, Celia Horton, Lito Pena ...

This list of names is just part of my attempt to generate memories of a “magical” moment in time. Arizona in 1972 was very conservative. Not one day went by that I wasn’t told something like “Go back to Mexico,” “Go pick some lettuce,” or “I’ll shove that recall petition up your ass.” But every day we continued to head back out into the neighborhoods to collect signatures, register new voters, and drum up support. To say that I hated it is putting it mildly. I couldn’t wait to get out. So when Vivian Levine and Jim Drake started talking about moving on to the boycott in Chicago, I volunteered to go even though the boycott work was something that I despised more than the recall.

Several months later, while reminiscing about my time in Arizona, I wrote a letter to Adela Serrano asking her to read it to the other UFW “recallers” who were still together in Chicago (I never mailed it). In the letter, I asked how it was that I hated the recall campaign while I was there and yet I was wishing that we were all back there again. How can we hate something while it’s happening and then miss it so much when it’s gone? It was actually a wonderful time for me. I just didn’t realize it then. I’ll have to learn to appreciate what I have, while I have it, because once it’s gone, it never comes back the same.

The Arizona Recall Campaign

The Arizona recall was initiated after then-Governor Jack Williams signed the Arizona Labor Relations Act, which made organizing farm laborers a very difficult task. The campaign lasted about one year, ending in the summer of 1973 (I wasn’t there at the start). It was begun in dramatic fashion with Cesar going on a very long fast. The center of the action was the Santa Rita Community Hall in a small Mexican neighborhood known as “El Campito.”

During the recall campaign, we registered more than 100,000 new voters and politicized the Arizona Hispanic population. To qualify for a special election, we needed to gather 108,000 signatures of registered voters. We gathered more than enough signatures, but never got the election. Personally, I don't think we had much chance of winning, but we sure shook things up.

The plan was to register as many new voters as possible. To ensure that we were registering "our" voters, we began with a request for a signature on a petition to recall the governor (known as "One-Eyed Jack"). If the person wanted to sign the petition, the next question was whether they were registered to vote. If the answer was no (not registered), then we would offer to register them on the spot. Several people on staff were deputy registrars. They would register the new voters.

The Republican establishment tried various ways to stop us from registering new Democratic voters. For example, Paul Marston, the local registrar of voters for Maricopa County, routinely cleaned the slate of deputy registrars in attempts to slow us down. He once decided that each party could have only a small number of deputy registrars. I remember changing my affiliation to Republican, and to American Independent, as did others, in order to continue registering voters. Ultimately, Marston set up an examination that he said would ensure that all deputy registrars were "competent." He published an 80-page booklet regarding the rules and regulations of voter registration. After studying this booklet, prospective registrars had to pass a 200-question multiple-choice exam to become a deputy registrar. Of course, the testing mechanism was really a means of slowing us down. And, of course, the test was designed to be very difficult to pass. Our attorneys challenged the exam on constitutional grounds and the test was disallowed.

When it started to look like we might actually gather enough signatures for an election, we began to put together a campaign for governor. Jerry Pollock, a Scottsdale Democrat, agreed to run as our candidate. The campaign consisted of Jerry walking through the Arizona communities meeting with thousands of families along the way. While Jerry walked, several organizers would work the approaching neighborhoods or towns, arranging house meetings for the candidate. He walked for several months and spoke to many, many voters.

Approximately 170,000 signatures were filed with the secretary of state, but as I said, we never got the election. Too many of the signatures were disallowed. A few years later a court ruled that some of the signatures should actually have been validated. But, by then, the recall had been disbanded and One-Eyed Jack was out of office. Most of the staff traveled as a group to work on the Chicago boycott.

Registering a New Voter

I had many assignments while working with the UFW. This is one incident that I like to remember and to share.

While working on the Arizona recall campaign, we spent many long hours gathering signatures and registering new voters. Our candidate, Jerry Pollock, walked the state campaigning for votes should an election be set. The recall staff had already blanketed the state for signatures, which were very easy to get at the start of the campaign. When it looked as if we might actually get the required number needed for an election, the assignment was to go out and register people who might be inclined to vote for our candidate. I was assigned to canvas a very conservative Anglo neighborhood in south Phoenix.

As you can imagine, I had many doors slammed in my face while in that neighborhood. One elderly gentleman told me that he was going to get a gun and come out onto the porch to shoot me. When I asked him why, he responded, "Because you're stupid, you're ignorant, and you're Indian." Goldwater was still a senator and Arizona was a very Republican place. But my story is about a separate contact down another street.

I asked a woman who came to one door if she would like to sign my petition to recall the governor. Like most of her neighbors, she declined. She politely told me that she liked the governor and that she would vote for him again. As I turned to walk away she asked if I was registering voters. I didn't like the idea of registering an anti-recall vote, but I responded honestly. I asked her if she needed to register, to which she responded no. However, she had a son who had just turned 18. Did I have time to register him? I was in a hurry to move on so I told her to bring him out and I'd register him. She informed me that he was disabled and that he was confined to a hospital bed in his bedroom. The woman wanted to know how he would be able to cast a vote. I told her that he could vote by absentee ballot. She led the way, and I followed her into the home.

The boy was in a rear bedroom with chains and bars situated throughout to assist him in what little movement he was able to accomplish. A small television set, mounted on the wall up in one of the corners, was on. The boy's body was twisted in various places. He could make certain sounds in response to my questions. He appeared to very much intact mentally, but he was horribly trapped in his very bony and twisted body.

I completed the various registration documents and had him make a mark where his signature was required. His mother and I signed as witnesses to his marks. As I gathered my things to leave, a local news reporter mentioned something about Governor Williams. The boy grumbled the words, "Governor Williams yecch!" I was surprised to hear this. In a Texas twang, his mother explained that her son "watched that TV set all day long. One day he saw Cesar "Shvezz" on television and ever since then he's hated Governor Williams." The son became very excited when I asked him to sign the recall petition. He made his mark on the petition. His mother and I signed as witnesses. And I got the best signature that day.

Lunch Money

Paul Marston initiated a registrar's examination as a means to ensure competence in registering new voters. He gave prospective deputy registrars an 80-page booklet to study. After preparing for the exam, a 200 multiple-choice examination was to be administered. Pass it and one could become a deputy registrar.

We held a press conference outside of Marston's office denouncing the exam. Several individuals went in and picked up the exam materials. They were told that the exam was a take-home, open-book test. Time was of the essence for us because we wanted to register more voters. The first nine persons to take the exam did so at the recall headquarters. They all turned in their exams the next day. All nine exams were confiscated while an investigation was conducted to ascertain if the nine had somehow cheated.

Marston then announced that all future testing would be conducted at his office in the presence of a proctor. The first nine exams had been corrected by the recorder's office so some of us used them to prepare. Scott Washburn and I used the corrected test to prep for the type of questions we might find later. Several persons chided us for using the old test because Marston had indicated that he was going to use a different method for the test in his office.

We both went down to the recorder's office to take the test. When the proctor gave the signal to open the test booklets, Scott and I looked at each other in surprise. It was the same test! Two hours were allowed for the test. However, we found it difficult to stay longer than 30 minutes. I received a 100% on my exam, which kind of screwed us regarding our argument that the test was designed to be too difficult for minority applicants. Either the test was okay or I cheated.

All of the test takers were subpoenaed for the hearing regarding the validity of the exam. We were sequestered for several hours while the attorneys argued the legal issues. Outside, many people were demonstrating. Inside many of us were very nervous. Finally, word came that we were allowed to leave. They never got to the issue of whether or not we had cheated because the court ruled that the test was unconstitutional.

P.S. On the day before we received our subpoenas, a few of the staff had been served and they had been given varying amounts of cash required of the serving party. We were told that the amount received depended upon how far away one was when served. So, the next morning we left word for the process servers that we would be gathering signatures at a strip mall several miles away. We waited for a few hours until the subpoenas arrived. More important, the cash arrived with the subpoenas. Each of us received the max allowed of \$15 and then we went to lunch.

The House Meetings

During the spring of 1973 Jim Drake came up with another gem of an idea to stir things up. I loved the guy, but every now and then he had us do some crazy things. He told us

that we were going to do an organizing blitz in several key voting precincts in order to fan the flames that had dimmed quite a bit. Pairs of organizers were assigned three precincts. Our mission was to organize one house meeting in each precinct over a three-day period.

My partner and I dove into our area intent on completing the job assignment. We realized very quickly that we were not going to be able to get anything going at all. I had heard the plans that others had for their areas of assignment. Adela Serrano and Alfredo Vazquez had neighboring precincts. They planned to collaborate by forming a car caravan in Adela's area that would snake through the neighborhoods picking up supporters along the route, with the procession to end up at the Santa Rita Hall. Alfredo would stir up the people from the small community (El Campito) and have a crowd waiting to welcome the procession. Both groups would then hold a rally for the recall. I was quite envious of them for having such great areas in which to work.

Each night I returned to the office without having been able to arrange anything at all. I did finally arrange for a possible house meeting for the third night. However, those plans fell through at the last minute. Disheartened, my partner and I decided to give up. We agreed to go over to El Campito to help Alfredo and to wait for Adela's procession. When we pulled into the parking lot of the Santa Rita Hall, only one car was there: Alfredo's. I was very embarrassed for the organizers. I knew that I couldn't go in right away because, for some reason, I found the sight of only one car in the lot to be very funny. I couldn't stop laughing for what seemed like a very long time. I didn't want to go inside until I had composed myself, so as not to make Alfredo feel bad. When I had composed myself sufficiently, we entered the hall. Many folding chairs had been set out, but only Alfredo and an old woman that he had picked up were sitting in the audience.

Alfredo's partner, Mary Mahoney, was situated nearby. She was from a very prominent Arizona family. Her father had been an ambassador during Kennedy's Camelot Administration. Mary was well-educated and always carried herself with great dignity and poise. As I entered the hall, I was fighting to keep my composure when I saw Alfredo and the old woman sitting there alone. For a moment, I felt that I knew how badly Alfredo must have felt. Mary then broke the silence. "Danny, would you like to sign our guest book?" I lost it right there. I had tears coming down my face as I laughed uncontrollably. At that point Adela arrived with her procession. One car (hers) was the entire procession. She came in while I was laughing and she joined in. She told me that not even the man at whose home the house meeting was to have been held had made it. Nobody showed up along the route as had been planned.

We all went to what had been called the Lincoln House (on Lincoln Street) to meet up with the organizers of the other house meetings. Everyone returned with reports of failed house meetings, except one team that had reported phenomenal success. The two women on this team told us how they had gone door to door practically dragging people out of their homes. As each team arrived with tales of woe, they were told of the one successful meeting of the night. The two women were heroes.

The two women arrived back at the Lincoln House before the other teams. They thought that they were going to be the only team to have “failed.” So, they made up a story and stuck to it as most, if not all, of the others arrived to tell how badly the night had gone.

At the staff meeting the next morning we were told that one of the women had packed up and left during the night. It seems that they were the first group home that previous night. And, not wanting to be embarrassed by their failed house meeting, they made up the story of how great the meeting had been. The woman who left couldn't face the rest of the team.

Riding with Cesar

My grandfather was proud that he rode with Pancho Villa. I am very proud that I rode with Cesar Chavez! Or at least I got to drive him and his dogs throughout California and Arizona. Working as a part of Cesar's security team was a wonderful opportunity to get to see him up close and personally. He was truly inspirational in many ways.

As a guard, I was with him for many hours every day. I used to bemoan the fact that we were always on duty, and that I rarely had free time to myself. But now I look back at the experience and give thanks that I was so fortunate to have been able to spend so much time with this great man. We drove up and down the state to countless meetings with politicians, community leaders, clergy, and others. Why had so many powerful people taken time out to meet with this man? Why did the farm workers in numerous small towns come out in great numbers to see and hear from him? I got to see him cry, as we pulled away from emotional rallies during various campaigns, and I heard him say on several occasions “How can we lose with this kind of support?” It was genuine.

We had around-the-clock security established in La Paz and while he was on the road. A high chain-link fence surrounded Cesar's small two-bedroom cottage. The yard was patrolled by his German Shepherds: Boycott, Huelga, Red, et al. When Cesar was at home, at least one guard was stationed outside. Each of the guards carried a walkie-talkie for emergencies and to let the other team members know when he was on the move.

On one occasion, Ted Kennedy's office sent out a security expert to show us how security details should work. He discussed how the security detail should be situated at every opportunity. We learned how the security cars should line up, where Cesar should be seated, how to protect his vehicle while we were on the road, and how to take evasive measures should the need arise. It was fascinating and very exciting. To this day, whenever I go through a doorway, I think about how we were told that one of his guards should go through first (in or out) in case a would-be assassin was set up on the other side. We all loved him dearly. I truly believe that most of the guys that I worked with would have gladly walked through any doorway for Cesar even if we knew that danger was imminent.

When we drove during the night, Cesar always rode up front and would tell us stories relating to the places through which we were traveling. He would do it to keep us awake as we drove. I can still remember his smile, and his laugh, and the way he put away the corn nuts that were always present on every trip.