

Laurel Reiner 1971

My most vivid memory of working for the UFW is the day that I was sent from Delano to San Ysidro. I was driven to San Ysidro by Andres Gonzalez, formerly with the Brown Berets, whom I met through my old friend, David Sandoval, at his house in Los Angeles. Andres drove me on the long trip down and deposited me at the home, where Margo Cowan, who was leading the strike, was living. We shared a room with the daughter of the house. Within my first few days there, we had a prayer vigil. The strike was against Egger-Ghio, and Cesar had come to support the strikers. I was not sure who he was, although I had some idea since I had seen pictures of him. He looked very similar to the other male strikers. There was no apparent distinction between him and the others. They were all praying, and it was evident that I was not. When it was over, he came up to me and said "Shalom." I was completely shocked and very moved.

I had come 3000 miles from suburban Westchester County, New York, in my senior year of high school to volunteer after being recruited by Jim and Susan Drake, who were working in the boycott in New York. I volunteered in the boycott office in New York City, where I met Richard Chavez and Dolores Huerta. I went to La Paz originally for a few days and then spent a short time in Delano.

After working with Margo for a month and a half translating documents, taking farmworkers to appointments, and translating for workers at legal offices and hospitals in San Diego, I was recruited to work with Hijinio Rangel, in Dinuba. I shared a room with his 10 children and worked with him on a strike in the nectarine fields for my remaining two months. I did contract enforcement with him and Tony Lopez. He tried to keep me from entering college, encouraging me to stay on to help them write a constitution. I told him I wanted to return and would be more useful to the union after college and law school.

I never did get to law school, studying for a master's in social work instead. The experience of working in California with the UFW was probably the most transformative experience of my life. It led me to do community organizing with the Latino community in Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, and later, registering them to vote in the congressional campaign of John Kerry in 1972.