

Georgiann Lyga (formerly McFadden) 1971–1973

Born To Justice

I always tell my older daughter that as a “farmworker baby,” she was born to justice. I think she resents it, but we can’t change the past...

Just three months pregnant when we arrived in Delano from Santa Cruz, my introduction to the farmworkers was not auspicious. We pulled up in front of a small house that appeared to be more planted in the earth than built on it. We crossed the wobbly porch, opened the door, and waded through knee-high trash and filth. I promptly bolted for the porch, leaned over the railing, and vomited. My (then) husband, John McFadden, came out and assured me it wouldn’t take much to clean it up. I replied that I was never going to step foot in that house again, let alone live in it.

This from someone who had spent nine years as a Maryknoll sister—two years of that in the slums of Santiago, Chile; a year in a marginal barrio in Cuernavaca, Mexico, eating suspect food in hovels that people called home; and even more time in the trenches of San Francisco’s Mission District in the 1960s, slogging through the trenches of home visiting. I had come a long way from my middle-class Midwestern upbringing, the last in a family of four. My father was a dentist and my mother a dental hygienist. They met at Marquette University.

Our tenure with the farmworkers, 1971 to 1973, was probably a notch in my belt I didn’t need. We spent most of the rest of that late August day in the car with John stopping to call La Paz, crossing the freeway to Forty Acres, calling La Paz again, then back again to the “white” side of town. We finally had the keys to one of Dolores Huerta’s old houses, a two-bedroom Craftsman home that was kitty-corner to a Catholic church. When I asked about the church from some of the organizers who materialized to help get us settled, they all replied that it was the “white” church. I stored that as useful information and after a couple of weeks, decided it was time to prove the lie. I went to one of the Sunday morning masses. It was all white. I never went back.

I still have the queen-size blanket we got for free with the mattress and box springs we bought at the local furniture outlet. A cousin in San Fernando Valley said she had twin beds for us if we would come get them. We did. I vaguely remember tying down mattresses to the top of the car and deciding we now had something in common with all the populations of Delano: traveling just like the Okies, speaking Spanish, as Catholic as the Filipinos, and being very white.

The twin beds are important. When Fred Ross, Sr. came to town to give a refresher course to the organizers, we were able to offer him hospitality. You can run through the list of all the UFW luminaries, starting with Cesar and Helen, Dolores, Richard, Andy Imutan, lawyers, doctors, and nurses, but Fred, Sr. remains my idol. What an incredible human

being: a gentleman and a scholar, proud parent and a brilliant organizer. He was our houseguest for several months, during which time his son Fred, Jr. frequently came for weekend visits. The twin beds were blessed and, yes, I still have them!

Early on, John made the trek to La Paz to “formalize” our status with LeRoy Chatfield. He came back with the news that we were to continue our health coverage under Kaiser. Oh. The closest Kaiser hospital was in Panorama City two hours away! Meanwhile, I went to the farmworker clinic for my prenatal care and made infrequent visits to Panorama City to establish a history with my designated attending doctor. Because I was so big at eight months, an x-ray was performed to see whether I might be having twins. This was not the case, but there was concern about the size of my pelvis. At age 36 and pregnant for the first time, my pregnancy was designated a “senile pregnancy.” I’m not lying! That’s what they called it in those days! And, no, I was not offended because at that point I was feeling pretty senile.

I was working at Forty Acres—secretary to Richard Chavez and 19 field organizers. The only allowance I got for my “condition” was an extended lunch hour so I could go home and rest for an hour. It was a privilege to work for Richard. I think he still owes me, though, for the more-than-one instance of comic relief I provided. Somehow I had adopted the modus operandi that anyone who had an accent spoke Spanish. Whenever one of the Filipino brothers came in and started talking to me, I would answer him in Spanish. He would reply, as would I, and it would just get more and more confusing. Meanwhile, Richard was sitting behind his desk splitting a gut! It took me several weeks to wise up and get it right.

As is often the case, the first baby was late. I continued to work *through* my ninth month. By that time I was so big I could no longer get behind the wheel of the car, so I told John I simply could not work any longer. We had done Lamaze training with Madeleine Cohen, so I would spend time each day practicing my breathing. I tried to houseclean some since my mother would be coming out to help after the baby was born. No matter how much I cleaned, though, I knew that at some point she would go into the kitchen in the dark, turn on the light, and see *cucarachas* scurrying for cover.

Finally the day came. I woke up in the morning with pains. I told John, “I think this is it, but I’m not sure, I’ve never done this before, I don’t know.” Given the travel time, John decided we wouldn’t take any chances.

I had what I presume were contractions the whole two-hour drive to Panorama City. We parked. I put one foot over the threshold of the hospital and the pains stopped. Given the distance, we decided to get checked out anyway. The doctor told us to go home. I don’t think so! Fortunately, John’s brother lived in Altadena so we decided to spend the night with them. On the way we stopped to have dinner at one of John’s favorite Italian restaurants. I ate a gargantuan meal washed down with lots of good wine. After taking in a movie, we finally arrived at Joe and Dianne’s and went to bed. At 12:30 a.m. the fun began.

We went back to the hospital, now just a pleasant half-hour away, where I was admitted. I was in labor for only about six hours since the concern about the size of my pelvis was correct—fully dilated and the baby was nowhere in sight. I was prepped for a C-section and delivered of an 8-pound, 10-ounce baby girl. She was named for her grandmothers: Elena Odile. John's mother's name was Helen but we opted for the Spanish form. Helen Chavez used to kid me about us naming Elena after her.

It turns out that LeRoy's call to continue our Kaiser coverage really paid off. The normal stay for a C-section was five days. On the morning I was due to leave the hospital, after nursing Elena, instead of calling for a nurse to come take the baby I tried to get up out of the chair with her in my arms. I opened my incision and proceeded to spend another five days in the hospital. The total charge for a 10-day hospital stay in the C-section nursery was \$300. Two years later we learned that Kaiser in Southern California was more expensive than in the north! For the birth of my second daughter, also a C-section, also with complications, Kaiser in Northern California charged \$150.

After Elena was born, John was moved to Lamont. We had a really nice house, and Robert Garcia lived with us for a while. From there we went to Colton to do the "No on 22" campaign for San Bernardino and Riverside counties. We rented a furnished duplex across from a shopping center and close to the college. We have a photo of Elena in a cardboard box, gripping the sides and squealing with delight. Because we had only brought suitcases with our clothes, her highchair was my knee. Besides our two counties winning, our biggest coup was getting the shopping center to announce on their marquee Cesar's visit at the college.

Then it was La Paz for the report back. This was probably my daughter's finest farmworker moment. We were gathered in a huge hall with Cesar giving a glowing account of the campaign. I was on the edge of the crowd, juggling Elena and trying to keep her quiet while Cesar spoke. Unbeknownst to me, a little boy about five or six years old had taken a liking to Elena and was playing hide-and-seek with her, which would send her into squeals of delight, which I would feverishly try to stifle. Her laugh was infectious and it really was distracting. Cesar finally just stopped and stared. I was mortified. When I turned around to exit, I almost tripped over the little boy who had elicited yet another screech of delight from Elena. It was then that I realized what I had often read in books: children can, and often do, confound the high and mighty.