

Pilar Pedersen 1971–1973

My Farmworker Story

I graduated from high school in January of 1971. My mother drove me down to La Paz in about March of that year. I was eager to leave Palo Alto. I had been to La Paz on a work project organized by my parents' church a few months earlier. We helped restore the dormitories. I met Lupe and Kathy Murguia, Venustiano and Kathy Olguin, Ernie the cook, and Tamar, his girlfriend. I was looking for an alternative to college, and the farmworkers' union fit the ticket. Excited I was to join forces with UFWOC!

Luckily, while back in the Bay Area I met Jessica Govea, who, I think, took a liking to me. Whether it was Jessica's influence or just that my stars were in alignment, I'll never know. When my application was accepted, instead of being assigned to one of the urban boycott offices, I was asked to come to La Paz. My journey had begun.

I worked for Jessica and Marshall doing office work for the first couple of months. It was a real transition for a wide-eyed innocent from Palo Alto. I had never held a job and was a very dreamy young girl. Imagine my shock as I dove headfirst into the culture of incessant work that characterized the farmworker movement.

After only two or three months I was sent down to Delano and Lamont to help with the seniority project. I spent endless hours in hiring halls, typing out those little plastic cards. Pat Lipinski, Tasha Doner, and Kathy Gilligan were some of the people I worked and lived with. I became familiar with Forty Acres, met Larry Itliong, and got to hang around the Filipino Hall.

When that project ended —now better adjusted to a straight diet of work—I was assigned to Cesar's office under Susan Drake. Andy Anzaldúa was Cesar's assistant at that time. La Paz was filling up as many of the union's directors were making the move from Delano. Chris and Pudge Hartmire, LeRoy Chatfield, Jim Drake and his family, Nancy Kleiber, Tasha, Ruth Shy, Blaze and Theresa Bonpane, Ruth Clark, Kris and Dave Smith, Fred Patch, in addition to all the other folks I've mentioned, were living at the retreat center.

I liked living in the Tehachapi Mountains and it was fun working in Cesar's office. I had a black lab puppy, and performed a variety of tasks, including doing large supply runs for the kitchen. I didn't truly understand or have a real reference to the basis of the farmworkers' union: the farmworkers themselves. I was living on a diet of vicarious inspiration that I received from the exceptional people surrounding me. Lots of famous folks poured through as well, all seeking Cesar: Joan Baez, George McGovern, Peter Matthiessen.

My real education began when I was sent down to Arizona to help David Camacho run his San Luis field office. There was a rumble that the lettuce workers were going to strike, or something exciting was about to happen. I can't quite remember; I don't know if it ever

materialized. I do remember Nancy Kleiber saying to me with a gleam in her eye that I was going into “the eye of the storm.” Maybe I was too engrossed in learning a new set of skills to notice. Or maybe the excitement never happened. I can only say that I vividly recall the next few months as they affected *me*.

My Spanish needed to convert from a complete knowledge of grammar, but almost no conversation, to fluency. And it did. I thought, spoke, dreamed, and breathed Spanish until I got it. Camacho was a character and I came to love him. He started teaching me about Mexican culture and graciously ignored or instructed me in my many areas of ignorance.

The new San Luis field office was in its final phases of construction, so I lived with Arturo and Carmen Garcia and their family. When the office was completed, David moved into its living space and I took up residence in the tiny trailer that had been the UFWOC office and his home.

The workers there I'll never forget: proud, smart, handsome men. I was and am still in awe of their savvy and intelligence, their humor and strength. I had so much to learn! My Palo Alto childhood had given me books but not smarts. I was wide-eyed, foolish, and oh-so-gullible. I learned how to receive dues, write dispatches, and do the office books. I learned from these kind people that I had miles to go before I could begin to be as quick and resourceful as they—a quest on which I have not yet given up.

Something must have been going on because Roberto Garcia and Jan (Juanita) Peterson were transferred to the San Luis office. The two of them are deeply laced into the memory of my growing-up years in the farmworkers' union. We crossed paths many times. Our work in San Luis brought us into frequent contact with the other field offices in the southern reaches of California. I got to know and respect Eliseo and Dorothy Medina of Calexico, and love and admire Alfredo Figueroa of Blythe and his wonderful guitar. Oh, how I loved to stand up at rallies, demonstrations, and fiestas and sing with that man!

I believe it was while I was in San Luis that we started busing up to Los Angeles to do grassroots organizing. Proposition 22 was a huge campaign. There were others. Shy and retiring, it was hard for me to do telephone organizing, canvas door to door, and stand for hours in front of supermarkets. But I did!

It was somewhere during this time that a fundamental change took place inside me. The farmworkers' movement ceased to be a theoretical cause of right versus wrong. It became true injustice perpetrated on people that I loved. My passion became personal. My work turned earnest, and I left behind me forever the mantle of a good-doing liberal.

I worked in San Luis from the fall of 1971 to about April of 1972. Our harvest season finished, and we were slowing down. Ray Huerta phoned Camacho and asked to “borrow” me for the grape season, which was starting in Coachella and he was short-handed.

So to Coachella I went. I joined the office staff, helping Manuel Arredondo run the service center: filling out insurance claim forms, learning about eligibility. I was still far from clever or quick-witted. I doubt that I helped him much. I lived in a little trailer on Highway 86 (?) that shook when the trucks rumbled past. I shared that trailer with whoever happened to be working out of the Coachella field office and needed a place to stay, including various farmworkers who were working in the vineyards. The organizers included Willie Barrientos, Jesus Villegas, Jan Peterson, Armando (Mando) ??, Esperanza Lopez, Claire Pershing. It was in Coachella that I found, then lost, my feet.

The first grape season was hot and frenetic. I didn't completely grasp what was going on and just followed orders. That winter Frank and Barbara came down from Delano to teach us about a new seniority system on which to base our hiring process. It was called "company seniority." Ray had departed, and it was Chuy Villegas, Vicente Ponce, and me, with Chuy in charge. We started computing hours for each worker in each company, by hand.

It was a good winter. I put my roots into Coachella, made deep friendships, and started blurring my cultural identity. I was also feeling spent from two years of incessant work. I had signed on with the farmworkers for one year and was nearing completion of my second. Two years represented an eternity to a 19-year-old. I thought I might retire. In the spring of 1973, Ray Huerta came back to head the office, bringing with him new faces—Mando, Hope, and Claire—new energy and big ideas. He persuaded me to stay on.

I was put in charge of the hiring hall. Company seniority didn't work: those with the highest numbers of hours on the few lists we had actually completed turned out to be irrigators and cooks! The growers laughed in my face. Workers stormed angrily out of the hiring hall when told arbitrarily when and where they could work; people who shared cars needed dispatches to the same companies on the same days! Families needed to stay together. It was a bad scene, and I was in no way capable of handling it. I started smoking cigarettes, gained 50 pounds, developed nervous tics, and would retreat to the bathroom when the pressure became unbearable.

Then the Teamsters arrived. Our contracts were up for renegotiation. The growers made some behind-door deals and signed with the Teamsters' union. At this same time the fragile façade holding me together cracked. Ray and I had a terrific fight, and I walked out on the life I'd made, my friends, my identity. And I missed helping with the strike.

I'm still sad that it ended this way and would do so many things differently now. I awoke to find myself back in Palo Alto, a physical and emotional mess, with enormous, confusing questions regarding my identity. Where were the people I loved? How was it that I was able to pick up and leave when the going got rough, but they were still there, living in the government camp? I was torn in two.

From the vantage point of the ensuing 30 years, I can say that I still don't have good answers to all of those questions. However, these small truths I have determined:

- 1) The lessons and gifts I received from the Mexican people impacted and informed the path my life would take.
- 2) I have never again lost sight of my own identity, or failed to recognize the world I'm from, no matter how tempting it might feel to do otherwise.
- 3) It is my opinion that people who set out to "help" others always receive far more than they could ever possibly give.

I remain forever grateful to the hearts and hands of those who reached out with kindness and humor to help me as I stumbled along, trying to learn.

I can't conclude this without acknowledging my debt of gratitude to Cesar and the organizers of the first strikes and boycotts. What inspired brilliance it was to integrate the whole strata of consumers into the farmworkers' quest for justice! How lucky we were, those of us who jumped at the invitation to immerse ourselves in the farmworkers' movement! We learned and grew in ways we otherwise never could have. I wish Cesar were here to read our words.

I write this in the high-desert mountains outside Presidio, Texas. I can see the Rio Grande and Mexico out my window. It seems I have spent my entire life trying to escape Palo Alto and have yet to succeed: I've lived the past 23 years in Boulder, Colorado, where I've raised a family. However, when my youngest graduates from high school in three short years, I will move here for good.

I realized recently that I've spoken Spanish more years of my life than not. "*La cancion del pueblo*" runs deep in my heart. I also learned at a young age that the antidote to despair is action. That by joining forces with people trying to effect change—social, economic, political, environmental, whatever—I can hook my life's energy in with those who are reshaping and redefining what it means to be human on this planet. It is exciting, dynamic, revitalizing, and—win or lose—it expands my heart. I have dipped into this many times and have come to see that it too is a recurring theme in my life. This knowledge, these memories, these gifts I owe to the farmworkers. I was baptized by the best.

Que viva la Causa!