

Jackie Davis (Brown) 1971–1974

There's some saying to the effect that everyone is a communist in their youth and when they are older they know better. Sister Christine Marie showed us a movie about striking grape workers in Delano in my senior year of high school and tapped into my idealist, openhearted, and maybe a bit socialist self. Right out of high school I worked with someone who was a supporter of Cesar Chavez and the boycott. She told me about striking farmworkers in a tomato farm in south San Diego. I studied up by reading *Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike* and in the wee morning hours in March of 1971, I went down to the tomato fields with my friend and joined the crowd of farmworkers and students, holding signs and singing songs. I met Gary Brown, a student and fellow idealist. He was a serious young man and seeker of justice, shortly to be my husband of 19 years. I met Margo Cowan, the brilliant, passionate, and charismatic organizer who was leading this wildcat strike. I was totally caught up in the activities and joined the early crowd often. I took a leave of absence from my job that June and became a full-time volunteer. What did this mean? Since this was an unauthorized strike, it meant no \$5 a week and room and board for me! It meant we ate what was donated, slept with farmworker families (for two months we crossed the border into Tijuana and learned the Spanish words “*linea*,” “*la migra*,” and “*pipa*” for where the running and non-potable water came from). We experienced the raw Teatro Campesino, in which the farmworkers would play out the scenarios of the foreman, workers, strikebreakers, and all the parties involved in the drama. Sometimes I understood the Spanish and sometimes I did not, but I always understood the plea for justice in the sounds and gestures.

The most formative experience, however, was working with a young man named Robert. He had been taught community organizing, and I vaguely remember that we were impressed that he had been trained by Fred Ross or at least in the Saul Alinsky school of community organizing. Every morning the volunteers met to tell him, and each other, our plans for the day. We were off talking with church coalitions, MECHA groups, collecting soda bottles house to house to raise money to pay for the electric bill in the little UFWOC (non-authorized) office, creating leaflets, picking up donated office supplies, food and clothing for the huelgistas. It was a daily 12- to 14-hour effort to keep the wheels turning. In the early evening we would meet a second time with Robert to tell him what we had accomplished and what we were going to do that evening. If we had not been successful, he helped us think through how to complete the task. It was an orderly way to harness an enormous amount of youthful energy. This approach has continued to work for me 30 years later. I often tell someone what I intend to do that day, as a way of helping me be focused and committed to a hard or even distasteful task that has to get done!

We also kept a vigil at the home of one of the two growers. This has been a source of some discomfort for me over the years. The man remained unyielding and eventually sold the farm rather than go with the union. Yet during this time, we picketed 24 hours a day,

seven days a week for a number of months and put ourselves in a fair amount of danger. I took my turn staying there alone for hours and was almost run over by a truck driven by someone who disagreed with our stance. It was the least productive way of protesting and most hurtful to him, his family, and the surrounding neighborhood. We often had discussions about the parameters of nonviolence. If someone pushed rusty nails into just-picked tomatoes in the fields, was that nonviolence? If we caused emotional distress to a grower family in order to coerce them into signing a contract and raising the working conditions and pay for workers, was that nonviolence? There were no easy answers, then or now, but wrestling with the issues and continually monitoring our behavior was always part of my farmworker experience.

At some point Gary and I were invited to go work in the Napa Valley on the Wine Nine boycott. We drove his blue VW bug with a broken starter switch up from San Diego to Napa and lived there for about three months. It was here that I actually saw the conditions of the camps in which migrant farmworkers lived: the kitchens, the old and bare mattresses, and the lack of heat. We also saw the camps for the Christian Brothers' workers, who had been unionized. They were palaces in comparison. The workers were proud to give us a tour of their kitchens and their sleeping areas. I planned our wedding from Napa and the Christian Brothers' foreman gave us some wonderful wine for our reception.

After our November wedding in 1971 we went to work in La Paz. We had a room that we painted and decorated and called home in the former tuberculosis hospital. We met Cesar Chavez and we finally received our \$5 a week. Living as far away from civilization as we did (Bakersfield was not yet civilized), we could actually save some of the money and we opened a savings in the farmworkers credit union. We worked with an awesome mix of people. We met some of the Filipino men who had been so much a part of the Delano experience, such as Philip Vera Cruz and Pete Velasco. One time we were at Forty Acres with Pete in what surely was 180 degree weather. He yelled out to the crowd, "Would someone close the windows? It's freezing cold in here," which allowed us a moment of laughter in the oppressive heat. I can still smell the alfalfa as we drove back to La Paz with the windows down that evening and Pete sharing his positive philosophies of life. We met Dolores Huerta, who remains one of my heroines, and enjoyed the friendship of her sons Vincent and Fidel for quite some time after we left the UFW. We played as hard as we worked, and I remember a hike to the top of Tehachapi Mountain and a great picnic on a glorious day. I remember that someone rented movies, and I saw "Citizen Kane" for the first time in the basement of the former hospital. I remember runs to the A&W in Arvin (or Lamont) for some heat relief in the evenings. We had mass together and meetings to explain the progress of negotiations in our community room—adults and children welcomed. We quickly added a pregnancy to the mix of experiences and I went through the heat of the summer growing steadily bigger.

My first job at La Paz was adding numbers on an adding machine. I don't remember what I was adding, but I remember my frustration at not being good at it. Cesar had spoken

passionately about the costs of the phone bills and how this had to stop and how we were going to buy our own equipment and circumvent the phone company's exorbitant bills, etc. In more than a few community meetings, Cesar threatened that he was going to bring someone in to be the switchboard operator who had the guts to cut off the phone calls at five minutes, since that was all we needed to do our business. I somehow knew that this could be my second job in La Paz. I asked Cesar if I could be the operator and he was very reluctant. His logic made sense to my 19-year-old mind and I finally convinced him to give me a try.

The UFWOC had purchased some old phone equipment and hooked it all up. One day I sat at the switchboard and plugged in my first phone call. Within the hour I was interrupting the calls of men and women who were about the business of changing the world. My line was "This is the operator. You have one minute left." And at five minutes I announced that I was ending the call. To my dying day I will be able to recall the sound of Marshall Ganz pounding up the wooden steps to roar out his protest to Cesar, while I continued matter-of-factly with my little contribution to *La Causa*. I certainly didn't want everyone to be mad at me, but in my naïveté, I was just about oblivious to the larger picture. During my months behind the switchboard I spoke to Joan Baez, Senator Ted Kennedy's office, and the mayor of New York's office. I also worked out plans with our main contract negotiator as to when to put grower's calls through and when to take messages. I was really a part of the action.

Though one would think that 10 hours behind a switchboard would have been enough for a day, at least a couple of times a week after work, Gary and I joined others in going into Bakersfield, house to house, to register voters. I took a week or two off from phones around May or June of 1972 to join Gary, who had come back to San Diego to run the UFW's effort in the McGovern campaign for the primary in California. It was an awesome experience. We knew so much more about organizing than the McGovern folks did and we had no trouble feeling superior. We had our precincts so well organized that on election day, there was very little for us to do. We also traveled to Los Angeles at one point to picket Nixon, which has remained a point of pride for me. And we picked pounds and pounds of cherries from a farm in the Delano area and Helen Chavez let me make cherry pies in her kitchen one weekend when the family was going to be away. Good memories.

We did not always get along with everyone and there were the normal things to deal with in a communal living situation, such as controlling dogs, eating, cooking and cleaning in the cafeteria, the loss of some good people when they were fired for smoking pot. One of our La Paz community died in a car accident and we grieved as one for him and his family. At one point Cesar left us to support efforts in Arizona and he fasted, so we fasted. But he left someone in charge with whom I did not see eye to eye. I'm sure today the same issues would mean nothing, but it was a dark moment for me then. At one point Nan Freeman was killed in the heated Florida battle for unionization, having been hit by a truck on a UFW picket line. I was plunged into sadness for her family and fasted three days on their behalf. I still have the letter her mother wrote back to us.

I turned over the reins of the switchboard right before our daughter, Amoreena, was born. The La Paz women had a shower for me, and LeRoy Chatfield gently eased my guilt for the expense of having a C-section delivery. Many babies were born in that La Paz community and people were very supportive.

A few months later we were assigned to the boycott in Los Angeles. This was a difficult time for me personally since I was no longer able to help out the movement in the way I had previously. I was an isolated young mother and my husband was gone for many hours a day, six days a week. I took a middle-of-the-night job to try to make a little money, but as the boycott leaders frowned upon this I had to keep it under my hat. It seemed that every time I planned to attend a march or large boycotting event, my little one would get sick. It was not a good situation, and thank goodness babies thrive in spite of us! An example of my ignorance as a mother and the pull to continue the work I had been doing is when we drove in a caravan from L.A. to Coachella one evening to show support for the striking lettuce workers. We slept on the bank of the Salton Sea under the moon with my poor infant very unsettled. In the daytime we were standing in the sun in the scorching-hot Coachella fields. One of the watching sheriffs came up to me and told me to put a hat on my baby's head or stand in the shade. He said that people who didn't live in the desert did not understand the power of the sun. It turned out that not all law enforcement were bad guys.

Some months after L.A., we were assigned back in San Diego. This worked much better for our family, and I often was able to contribute by typing out the flyers and running them off on the donated mimeograph machine we had in our house. My younger sister, Patty, picketed with us one time and met her eventual husband, Francisco, who was also on the picket line that day. It was a family tradition. Gary and I had been working for the farmworkers for three years when he realized that he needed to complete his education and contribute from a different vantage point.

I recently went to a Santana concert. Carlos Santana shouted out the names of some powerfully influential people in his life: Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela. He included in the list the names of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. How can I tell those who accompanied me to the concert that ***I was there***? How can I capture those years, the faces, the sureness, the heart of the movement? I can only whisper these words and begin to tell the story.