

Ramon Romero 1971–1974

It all started when I attended an American G.I. Forum dinner and dance in Kansas City, Missouri, on a Saturday night in the fall of 1970. My father and uncle had been members of that organization of Mexican-American World War II veterans so I was familiar with the group. At the time, I was 20 years old and in the process of dropping out of the University of Kansas after three years of study toward an aborted engineering career. Math and science were my academic strengths, but three years of anti-war protests and a change in the draft law led me to seek status as a conscientious objector. I had become a regular at the Aztlan Center on the west side of Kansas City. It was my Aztlan Center friends who accompanied me to the dinner and dance. We were more interested in meeting girls than in hearing speeches that night, but one speaker caught my attention. It was Nick Jones, the newly appointed coordinator of the lettuce boycott for the K.C. area. He gave an impassioned plea for help and asked for volunteers to come to his house the following Saturday morning. I made a mental note and didn't forget, even though I ended up in a drunken bar room brawl later that night after the dance. However, that is another story.

The following Saturday morning I was surprised and somewhat disappointed that only one other person and I arrived for the boycott activities. As Nick played with his infant children, Raquel and Martin, and his wife, Virginia Rodriguez, prepared breakfast (sourdough pancakes), he assigned me the task of surveying the brands of lettuce being sold in Kansas City. He wanted to determine how much of it carried the UFW label. That was it. How I accomplished this task was up to me. My engineering mind went to work. I immediately determined that my main tools would be the telephone yellow pages and a map. In about an hour, I plotted a course down the main streets of the city that would most efficiently allow me to survey as many stores as possible. By early evening, I had completed my task and summarized my findings on a written table. Nick exclaimed in amazement when I presented the information to him. He offered me a job as a lettuce boycott volunteer on the spot, and, even though I was somewhat stunned, I accepted.

I had followed the grape boycott in the news and was aware of Cesar Chavez and the farmworker movement. However, I had never really seen myself as someone who could be part of *La Causa*. I came from two generations of railroad workers who emigrated from the states of Guanajuato and Zacatecas in Mexico before 1920. My grandfathers had settled in Kansas and worked for the Santa Fe and Union Pacific railroads. The only farm work I had ever done in my life was during the summers that we visited my uncle's family in the Yakima Valley in Washington state. I soon came to realize, however, that *La Causa* included all Mexican-Americans, not just farmworkers. I strongly identified with a movement I thought was geared to benefit all of *La Raza*.

I went on to become first the Kansas City and then the Washington, D.C. lettuce boycott coordinator. I eventually achieved my conscientious objector status because I was motivated to continue working for the union. To my knowledge there has never been any other Mexican-American conscientious objector in the history of Kansas. My opposition to

the Vietnam War had been a bitter pill for my father, a hardcore WW II U.S. Navy veteran, to swallow. However, I think it helped when I went on to work for Cesar Chavez, a man I am sure he admired.

In any event, my adventures in the lettuce boycott are too numerous to chronicle here. Highlights include meeting many of the members of the California congressional delegation whenever Dolores Huerta, Richard Chavez, or Art Torres came to lobby. In June of 1972, I accompanied Richard Chavez and Dolores Huerta to a meeting with a Democratic National Committee representative at DNC headquarters located in the Watergate. The following Saturday morning, I opened up the *Washington Post* and read with great interest about a break-in at the very offices I had just visited. Yep, my voice is probably on one of those tapes asking the location of the bathroom. On another visit, I sat between Dolores Huerta and Ethel Kennedy at a dinner at the Kennedy mansion at Hickory Hill in Virginia. Those were some of the glamorous moments.

What I remember most, however, was how hard we worked. In D.C. we ran a successful lettuce boycott operation and an even more effective boycott against the Napa Valley Nine vineyards during a hiatus in the lettuce boycott. We were offered a bribe from one liquor store owner during the Napa boycott. On one Saturday evening, after a very successful week picketing another liquor store on the site where the Hoover Building (FBI headquarters) now stands on Pennsylvania Avenue, we were the prey in a high-speed car chase through the streets of downtown Washington, D.C. The owner of the store had apparently hired a carload of thugs to beat us, but we successfully took refuge in a police station. We maintained our picket line. We were true believers.

I went on to work another couple of years for the union in California. I did various jobs in La Paz, but remember most working as a strike benefit administrator during the grape strikes of the summer of 1973 in Kern County. I will never forget the funerals of farmworkers Nagi Daifulah and Juan De La Cruz, both members of picket lines I serviced. I will also never forget the Sunday morning I chased a bizarre man in a car from La Paz to Bakersfield after I found him spying on La Paz through binoculars from a spot on the highway above La Paz. It turned out that he had a gun. What was he up to?

I know my UFW adventures pale by comparison to those of other volunteers, but these experiences molded the rest of my life and gave me lifelong friends across the country and around the world. I became a lawyer because I saw the work that UFW lawyers did and wanted to emulate them. They were from Boalt, the law school at U.C. Berkeley, so I insisted on attending that school. I eventually graduated in 1980. I have been a union-side labor lawyer now for 22 years in the employ of the California Teachers Association. I have never met a teacher who wasn't favorably impressed with my UFW background. Daily, I walk by a poster of Cesar Chavez on my way to my office in the CTA headquarters building. When I go home to San Francisco in the evening, I exit the freeway at Cesar Chavez Street. Talk about destiny!

In October of 2002, I visited Helmut Zingsem in Berlin, Germany. He was a volunteer I met in La Paz in 1974. We became fast friends back then, but lost touch in the 1980s. I relocated him in 2001 via the Internet. He invited me to help celebrate his 50th birthday in Berlin in October of 2002. We did so by running the Berlin Marathon. A couple of days later we sat down in his living room and viewed six boxes of slides that he had accumulated during his UFW days. There they were—many of my old friends as they looked 30 years ago. I thought to myself as I listened to the passion in Helmut's voice as he described his own UFW experiences: *La Causa* went way beyond just Mexican-Americans.

La Causa was a movement that went far beyond the borders of the farmworker community. It gave inspiration and opportunity to a generation of young people. For the inspiration and opportunity that it provided to me, I will always be grateful. *Viva La Causa!*