

Pearl McGivney 1971–1977

On December 19, 1971, I traveled to California with a leaflet in hand to spend three weeks looking into the work of the farmworker movement. I stayed five years. These were such eventful years in the history of the farmworker movement that they are indelibly burned into my memory.

The adventure had begun around 1968 when I, a native of Brooklyn, New York, discovered the reality of farmworkers' lives through the documentary film *Harvest of Shame*. Shortly thereafter, I learned of the boycott of California grapes from people passing out leaflets outside of grocery stores in Manhattan and Brooklyn and began to join in. Before dawn we would travel to Hunts Point where the fruit was brought in and distributed and would picket and hand out flyers. At that time I was teaching high school students about the boycott, the movement, and social responsibility.

Knowing I wanted a fuller commitment to the farmworker movement, I called Jim Forest of the Peace Movement and asked, "If you wanted to work with farmworkers, where would you go?" He gave me the name of Jim Drake who was the director of organizing at the La Paz headquarters. Jim's response to my letter of inquiry—"Come and see"—intrigued me, so I bought a plane ticket and headed west for the first time in my life. I had only one leaflet with a Delano phone number on it, and my plane arrived in the evening.

At the Bakersfield airport, I called the number on the leaflet and was given a disconnected message. I tried all ways I could think of to get a better number, but none were listed or available, so since it was getting dark out and I had no idea where I was in relation to Delano, I decided to stay overnight in the airport. This would be a good idea in New York; but Bakersfield closed the airport at night. I called a local church, got a number for a convent, and asked a passenger at the airport to give me a ride to the convent.

When I arrived, the sister who admitted me near midnight told me some of the sisters in this convent were very opposed to Cesar Chavez and I should not tell them where I was going. Breakfast was interesting: I had come 3000 miles to go where? To do what? Avoiding the questions was a challenge. I learned of the farmworkers' struggle to educate the churches to their reality.

Somehow that day, I found a number for La Paz and contacted Jim Drake who sent someone to pick me up. The trip to La Paz from Bakersfield took less than an hour, during which I learned much about the movement. At that time, La Paz was in early stages of being organized as the headquarters for the fledgling movement. Cesar Chavez and his family lived there, as well as a cadre of volunteer farmworker and non-farmworker families who worked full time. My first impression of the former hospital building rooms that were now serving as homes for the single volunteers and other administration buildings and family residences was one of pleasure that the environment befit the struggle of the workers' lives. No lap of luxury for Cesar while the people lived in dire poverty! The

headquarters served its purpose well—we were all to be focused on the goal and committed to the task of sharing the workers’ struggle for a better life for their families.

Because it was Christmas time when I arrived, many volunteers left to join their families, and I was invited to the Flores’ home in Santa Monica. My Spanish was very limited to say the least, and this immersion into family life and participation in a Mexican Christmas complete with midnight mass and piñatas, plus a trip to the beach, was a great beginning for me. When we returned to La Paz after the brief holiday, we were all ready to work even harder.

Most who joined the movement had been activists and were always chafing at the bit to be out in the fields where farmworker organizing took place. Being new to the scene, I didn’t realize that no one really wanted to be assigned to La Paz for long, isolated from the “real activity.” Ruth Shy, a Loretto sister, had been working in La Paz as Jim Drake’s administrative assistant, and took advantage of the fact that I was coming to get herself assigned out to the fields. So, without even meeting her, I became her successor working at the headquarters with Jim Drake, who was often on the road.

Jim Drake was one of the most outstanding people I had ever met, and I continued to admire him for the rest of his life. His dedication to the farmworker movement inspired me from the beginning. He was natural with Cesar, who obviously trusted Jim’s judgment in planning and organizing. Working in his office, I was aware of the magnitude of the task of organizing farmworkers throughout the state of California and training organizers necessary to keep the movement in line with the principles of nonviolence embodied by Cesar.

On January 19, 1972, my fate was sealed in terms of my lifetime commitment to justice for farmworkers. Nan Freeman, a 19-year-old college student, died on the picket line at Talisman Sugar Company in Belle Glade, Florida, where the farmworkers were striking for better pay and benefits. She had been helping to give leaflets to truck drivers as they pulled onto the farm at dawn and a trailer knocked her down as it swerved onto the road. Nan’s parents came to La Paz for a memorial service, and that night I remember thinking that if Nan could give her life for farmworkers, I would live mine with them. I wonder if the morning glories planted in La Paz in her memory still bloom?

During that year I was engaged in administrative work at La Paz and had the opportunity to interact with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Jim Drake, Marshall Ganz, Jessica Govea, LeRoy and Bonnie Chatfield, Lupe and Kathy Murguia, and many others who were working to coordinate the movement activities. Cesar himself was certainly the engine that drove the movement, but the direction was clearly set by farmworkers themselves. A master of plumbing the riches of other persons, Cesar knew how to probe until he brought out the best in each participant. He knew to what limit he could push each person to achieve the most from him or her—telling me he puts the sword in until he feels the steel.

A major focus of life at La Paz during those halcyon years was the creation of community. Cesar asked the assistance of those of us with religious backgrounds in community building to assist in creating an environment in which each family participated in a community dedicated to the principles of justice and nonviolence. Religious and social activities became equally important as we continued to labor exhaustively to coordinate our support of the organizing activities in the field offices. Farmworkers throughout the state were bused in for workshops and training sessions, which brought forth new ideas for moving forward toward the goals of unionization of farmworkers.

Sometime in 1972, I was asked to work with the National Farm Worker Health organization founded by Cesar. It operated clinics for farmworkers. The task of coordinating the medical resources included recruiting doctors and nurses, seeking funds, and responding to organizers' requests for medical services in farmworker communities. This gave me the opportunity to work with registered nurse Margaret Murphy, who was really the heart of the Delano clinic. She worked there until she was asked to go to Salinas to open a clinic there for workers. As ever, Margaret was totally available to do even what seemed impossible if it was for the benefit of the workers' families.

Around April of 1973, the movement executed another 180-degree turn. On Palm Sunday, Cesar and the first group left La Paz and relocated to Coachella. The grape contracts in Coachella Valley were up for renegotiations and the workers went out on strike. This began a six-month period of extensive strikes, picket lines, political activities, jailings, beatings, harassment, and killings. I also left La Paz and became more mobile, working out of the strike areas to better coordinate the clinic's attention to the needs of the strikers' families.

During that period the Teamsters' local attempted to raid the fields and cooperated with the growers in attempting to destroy the farmworkers' movement. The picket lines were volatile, and violence easily erupted as hundreds of workers, supporters, police, and Teamster provocateurs confronted each other in the hot desert sun. Hundreds of workers were arrested weekly, processed through courts and jails, and returned to the picket lines.

Supplemental staff were assigned from La Paz and other organizing offices to Coachella, and the action intensified. All resources were concentrated on the strike and resultant boycott of California grapes. The strike activities followed the harvesting of the grape crops from Coachella to Lamont (where Naji Daifullah was killed) to Delano (where Juan de la Cruz was killed) and culminated in Fresno. Here, in August of 1973, the strike resulted in the arrests of hundreds of farmworkers and clergy, religious, and lay volunteers.

Around July 30, 1973, Cesar sent a call out to religious leaders to come and participate in the strike lines and be available to be arrested with farmworkers seeking their civil rights to organize and protest injustice. Striking workers had been arrested on the picket lines so often during this massive period of worker protest that Cesar felt the presence of religious leaders necessary to facilitate the protection of workers' rights. Dorothy Day, the leader of

the Catholic Worker movement, arrived with major superiors of religious orders, ministers, and priests ready to be arrested if necessary.

There was a media blackout in effect throughout the county and it was difficult to get news of events in Fresno out to the public. Cesar asked me to contact church and religious organizations to ask them to call their local media and ask questions about the farmworker strikes and arrests. It took massive coordinated efforts to redirect attention to the farmworkers' plight. The presence of religious personnel in jail in Fresno called attention to the hundreds of workers who would not be released on their own recognizance. Although this option was offered to the clergy and religious, it was not available to the workers.

Dorothy Day and others organized those held in the former camps for Japanese internees to teach each other to facilitate the passage of time while they were in detention. Thus classes of nonviolence, yoga, prayer, and meditation, civil rights, etc. were presented by the detainees. Outside of the Fresno jail, the movement undertook a fast for justice. In the hot August sun, hundreds of supporters sat in silence and fasted throughout the 15 days it took to obtain the release of the prisoners of conscience. People came from all over the country to participate in these activities in support of the farmworkers' struggle for justice.

Thus it was that on or about August 15, 1973, Cesar declared the end of the strike and called the membership to a massive planning session in La Paz. Talks were intensive and extensive, with farmworkers, staff, organizers, and other volunteers participating in planning the strategy for the movement to go forward. The boycott of California grapes was agreed upon and organizers assigned throughout the country. These days of strategizing exemplified the movement at its best. Everyone strained to contribute whatever ideas might be helpful; Cesar listened intently and asked probing questions. The thoughts of each person were equally significant; more than once Cesar had capitalized on a casual comment of a farmworker that resulted in a successful organizing campaign. The founding convention of the United Farm Workers of America took place in September of 1973.

As the boycotters spread across the country, they located in major cities to begin the long hard task of educating the consuming public about California grapes. I was amazed at the courage of local farmworkers and their families who immediately left home and headed to big cities with barely the essentials for living and found welcome and support among people of conscience. Seeking housing and food for groups of 20 to 30 people in a city was no small accomplishment. Transferring grape-picking skills to public speaking and organizing skills was even more difficult. The boycott embodied the best training possible for some of the greatest organizers who continue now to lead the United Farm Workers of America.

In December of 1973, I joined the farmworkers' vigil outside of ShopRite stores in Brooklyn, New York. I had traveled across the country by bus, stopping at major boycott cities to attempt to recruit doctors and nurses for the clinics. With me on that day were

Sister Mary Dunleavy, Sister Joan Shanley, and Sister Ann Maura, members of my religious community. It happened that the farmworkers and we were arrested on trespassing charges at ShopRite that day. The candlelight vigil on Christmas Eve in front of that store was especially poignant.

We went to trial in a Brooklyn courthouse in January of 1974 and eventually the charges were dismissed. However, I remember two things that affected me deeply at that time: 1) being overwhelmed by the realization that someone could actually lie in a court of law, and that I could be convicted based on that lying; and 2) being told by one of the court guards, "Sister, today you will see how it is true that there is no justice for poor people."

When I return to La Paz in 1974, I began to work with the legal department and again had the privilege of working with monumental human beings. As chief counsel, Jerry Cohen combined legal brilliance with a wit and style that intrigued friends and created enemies. No grower's attorney ever relished a day in court with him as an opponent. He coordinated the work of numberless attorneys in La Paz, in field offices, and throughout the strike and boycott areas with an ease that belied his intense commitment to justice. Consequently, the attorneys who worked full time with him for the movement were of the highest caliber and collectively achieved wonderful victories for the cause of farmworker organizing.

I remember particularly when the strawberry pickers were on strike in Oxnard in 1974. A team of attorneys, which included Ellen Lake, Deborah Boone, and Ellen Green, were assigned to the strike. What I loved about the scene was how the attorneys lived right in farmworkers' homes and participated in all activities and knew well the lives of the clients they were defending in court. We called it the women's legal team since the assistants also included Laura Schaeffer, a law student from New York, and my sister, Ruthann O'Donnell, who also came as a volunteer from New York. Together we worked very effectively to provide the legal backup to the organizing and strike activities.

During 1974, much of the movement's political activity was directed toward the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA), which was the Magna Carta for farmworkers. Farmworkers and staff from throughout California worked on political campaigns to assist politicians who supported *La Causa* and picketed Sacramento to make both the plight and the organized strength of the movement evident to state government. The passage of the act opened up new avenues of organizing as the union began to prepare workers to petition for union elections. Again, it was a period of great strife as growers did their worst to prevent unionization, and the Teamsters again attempted to raid the fields.

When elections were being carried out in various parts of the state, I spent some time working with the legal department in Delano. Attorneys Barry Winograd and Glenn Rothner taught me much and enabled me to function in a quasi-paralegal position assisting in investigations and documentation and even appearing for farmworkers in administrative hearings under the ALRA. Sister Maryellen Kane, Sister Noreen Sullivan, and I functioned as a team in assisting the attorneys. Barry and Glenn were outstanding human beings as

well as competent and committed attorneys who served the movement with wonderful ease and humor.

During that interval, Jerry Cohen had determined to open a legal office in Salinas and sent me on ahead to do some preparatory work. He wanted it to be a *fait accompli* when he presented it to Cesar, who of course wanted his chief counsel at the headquarters in La Paz. The Salinas area was known as strong UFW territory with many committed members. It was a thrill to be working with the lettuce cutters who were in a sense the “elite” of the farmworker membership. With the opening of a legal office, the triad of organizing, medical benefits, and legal services became available to facilitate the workers’ organizing for elections. Of course, the growers challenged many elections, and the legal teams were kept busy documenting and filing charges of abuse and violation of the new agricultural law.

Receiving word of my father’s death in New York on April 1, 1976, I left Salinas and headed east. After a period of mourning, I received a call from Cesar requesting that I do recruiting of doctors and nurses on the East Coast. So I traveled from New York to Canada, to New England and Washington, D.C., to organize for medical personnel and raise funds. The farmworker movement was known and respected throughout the area and doors magically opened and support was willingly given to assist the workers. It was thrilling to be part of a movement, which called for the best from all who believed in justice.

At this time also, Mack Lyons, a board member of the UFW, was the director of organizing in Florida. For a long time, he had been trying to get me to go to Florida, but when I asked Jerry Cohen to assign me there, he said when the Agricultural Relations Act passes there I could go. He probably knew that would never happen, but Mack Lyons had me convinced it was imminent. Finally, in August of 1976, I moved to Florida, my theory being I was closer to home to help my mother and that the time had come for union organizing in Florida. I worked with the union in Florida for another two years before I realized the movement had no immediate future in this state. However, those years were fruitful in coming to know the Coca-Cola workers. The Coca-Cola Minute-Maid contract was the only union contract in the state of Florida and the workers here had organized and struggled to achieve it. For the years it was in effect, they had to continue struggling for every benefit achieved. Contract enforcement was an ongoing battle as the company tried to take back every benefit obtained in negotiations. Genuine indigenous leadership had developed among the workers of Central Florida, and although the union contract was eventually lost and Coca-Cola sold its groves and juice plant, those workers are still exercising leadership roles in community development.

The next time I traveled to California was when Cesar Chavez died. A group of former Minute-Maid workers and union members rented vans and drove across country for the funeral. What an experience for all of us! The event was such a celebration of Cesar’s life! The march through Delano was reminiscent of many marches of the past, yet full of

promise for the future. And we were invited to stay overnight in La Paz before heading back to Florida. The workers were welcomed by Cesar's son, Paul Chavez, and received as brothers and sisters in the struggle. They returned to Florida with many great memories.

These are only a few of the memories I cherish about the time I spent with the farmworker movement. It was a golden era of organizing and of belief in our abilities as a human community to bring about a better world in which all could participate equally in the benefits of our labor. It was a time when a charismatic leader such as Cesar Chavez could inspire thousands to sacrifice for the good of all. It was a time that echoes down through history and continues to call us forth to work for justice for farmworkers and which reminds us that the task is not yet completed. It was a time that enabled us to live "*Si Se Puede.*"