

Joe Digman and Jeanne McNassar 1971-1972, 1975-1978

Joe Digman

In 1968, just before the November election, my best friend's father gave me a "Boycott Grapes" bumper sticker, explaining that some farmworkers had started a union. Rev. John Whiteneck was a UCC minister recently relocated to Oregon from Bakersfield, CA, and had kept up on the progress of the movement since Cesar had spoken at his church years before. As he gave me the sticker with the squared-off eagle, I remember thinking that "it's about time." My grandfather was a Filipino farmworker in Stockton. A few weeks later, a Portland social worker volunteering for the Portland boycott committee spoke at a meeting of the Young Democrats Club in Portland, explaining the grape boycott and the non-violent struggle to form a union for farmworkers. I would get to know Carolyn Eckels, and dozens of other staff and volunteers, as kind of a family. That is the way the movement developed in Oregon and the rest of the Pacific Northwest, like an extended family.

Nick and Virginia Jones ran the Portland boycott effort, and Nick was my first mentor in the art of organizing. He had me get him into my high school to speak, he had me collect the Beaverton High School volunteers who came out Saturdays for picket lines, and he showed me, by example, how to reward those who turned out with feelings of accomplishment and community. I was on the speech team at the time, and that year I went to state finals with the oratory I had written about the movement. When the first contracts came in on the grapes, a small group of us stayed up all night mimeographing and cutting out union labels to staple to the grape lugs at the stores the next day. When the boycott finally ended, Nick and Virginia left the next day for Salinas, and he invited me to come down and visit him. My senior year in high school was just beginning, but my mother, a good "union maid" since the 50s, took me down there to see the beginnings of the strike in the lettuce crop.

It was my first epic experience, and I guess I got hooked, although I didn't know it at the time. In fact, we never did hook up with Nick and Virginia, instead being sidetracked by every organizer we ran into. One asked me if I was volunteer staff, and I asked what he meant. He asked wearily if I did this full time for pay, and in the many years since then I have often mused at the irony of his choice of words. After those few wild days, mom and I raced back to Portland, where I captivated my friends with tales of the adventure. Just then, into the room walked a girl I had never met, wearing a "Boycott lettuce" button, and my eyes jumped out of my head. Not only was this someone who was amazingly aware, but also the most appealing human being I had ever seen. Of course, she must have jumped the gun a bit because, I explained to her, I was in Salinas on the picket lines just yesterday morning, and I knew of no boycott. She countered that Cesar had announced the boycott last night, and she had immediately used her father's label maker to update her "Boycott

grapes” button. Since that moment, I have never won an argument with her, even as she sits next to me today, nearly 40 years later.

Kate Barton took over for the Joneses, and it was she who eventually recruited me onto the staff of the Portland boycott. We had a tight core of volunteers, so when I had trouble finding work after I graduated high school, I had no trouble seeing myself living and working with these people. Don Orange, another graduating volunteer, had joined the staff before I did, and soon after me, Jeanne McNassar, the girl from my high school, joined as well. Later, a buddy of mine, Tom Bates, joined as well and was sent down to the L.A. boycott. This all transpired in early summer of 1971, and by mid-summer a crisis had developed in the state for UFWOC.

Oregon growers, panicked by the union victories in California, pushed an abusive and illegal farm labor bill through the Oregon legislature. Wally Priestly, a member of our UFWOC community and a state legislator, alerted Kate, and she got on the phone to Marshall Ganz. Within 48 hours, Jerry Cohen, Fred Ross, Jr., and others were sitting in the Portland boycott house in N.E. Portland, pulling together a response. Cesar was due to come up soon. We held daily rallies in front of the state capitol in Salem, the organizing department sent up organizers to start organizing farmworkers, and national media began to show up. The very conservative Republican attorney general recommended that the Republican governor veto the bill because it was unconstitutional, and Gov. Tom McCall indeed did so. Of course, everyone knows that stuff, so let me tell you about “Charlie Potatoes.”

One of the most vicious and strident backers of the bill was an eastern Oregon potato grower we nicknamed “Charlie Potatoes.” At our victory party, some of us younger staffers were goading a young, mild-mannered Catholic priest, Father Jim, into making a crank call. The priest was helpless to escape our teasing since he was trapped lying on the sofa by a bottle of wine, now no longer in the bottle. I remember our ringleader, Don Orange, though he denies it, put the phone in his hand and helped him dial the home number of the Oregon speaker of the house, a Republican. Father Jim, who sounded nothing like Charlie Potatoes, drunkenly began the crank call identifying himself as the infamous grower. Much to his surprise, and lacking a suitable punch line to end the call, he had to let the speaker of the house begin to unload his frustrations about the day’s events onto Father Jim. In an instant, Jerry Cohen snapped from languid intoxication into stone-cold sobriety, his eyes ablaze with excitement over the turn of events. He flew up the stairs to the extension phone in Kate’s bedroom, leaving one of the staff on the landing to relay the questions and comments he wished to put into the hapless cleric’s mouth. For a good 10 or 15 minutes, the union’s legal director pumped the opposition leader for vital information through a young priest whose pleasant alcohol buzz had surely turned into one of Dante’s levels of hell. For whatever reason, no other farm labor bill ever made it out of committee in the Republican-controlled legislature. Father Jim joined the union staff soon after.

In December, Jeanne and I were offered a transfer to the Philadelphia boycott staff, and with more adventure in our hearts than brains in heads, we set off for the East Coast in the dead of winter, driving my old defrocked Oregon state police car. Our parents were beside themselves with common sense about the hazardous driving, but we pressed on to learn the important lesson that you should listen to your parents sometimes. We drove for a week, spending New Year's Eve snowed in at a cheap motel in Twin Falls, Idaho, and driving 5 miles an hour, hundreds of miles from nowhere, in a whiteout in western Colorado. We took a detour off the freeway near the Rockies on the advice of a hitchhiker who assured us that the detour, besides being conveniently near his home, was a great way to avoid what would surely be a closed freeway. We were happy to finally see him safely home because he spent much of the time on the isolated back road detour telling us how happy he was to finally be out of prison. As it turned out, the detour was indeed a shortcut, and the freeway was, in fact, closed that day.

In those days, Marshall had the unusual idea that all trips, no matter their length, could be completed with \$50 cash. As you might expect, even in the days of 30-cents-a-gallon gas, we rolled into Omaha, Nebraska late at night and quite broke. With our meager cash, we pulled up to a gas station pay phone and started calling churches. A Unitarian church's social action committee was just finishing up its monthly meeting when one of its members picked up the phone. Utterly guileless, I told them we were farmworker organizers in need of a place to stay and enough gas money to get us to Philadelphia. I didn't remember to also mention we had no food. The person answering the phone called out to the group for anyone who could help, and in moment a woman got on the phone giving us directions to the church. She was a single mom in her late 30s with a 10-year-old son, and she took us in like relatives. The group had raised some gas money, and she fed us and housed us in her tiny apartment. We talked to her and her son about the movement, the conditions of farmworkers, and the spirit of the strikers in Salinas, which I had seen directly. We left her with full stomachs the next morning, along with our thanks and enough Taller Grafico stuff to start an office. That was the quintessential boycott experience of my life. That memory has sustained me through many a cynical moment I would have as the movement matured.

Soon we were taking the Lehigh St. exit into North Philly, into what was and still is one of the poorest and oppressed places on the planet.

In 1972 the lettuce moratorium was in effect, and we had to make do with organizing a boycott around a small group of wineries we called the "Wine Nine." Clearly a busywork project for the mighty boycott organization, it nonetheless gave me personally a couple of distinct memories. First was picketing wine shops in Princeton, New Jersey during the coldest weather I had ever experienced on a picket line. There is an unusual number of unusually intelligent people in Princeton, and an unusual number of spoiled and privileged people. The biggest pain I ever experienced on a picket line was working through the cognitive dissonance crisis we created when some highly educated rich liberals tried to justify crossing our picket line just to get their favorite wine, and why that was OK in the

grand philosophical scheme of things. This experience was starkly juxtaposed with a wine shop in Camden, New Jersey. Whenever I approached a store manager with a picket line, I always took the time to carefully explain the moral imperatives involved before even implying a threat of union action. I did so at a small liquor store in Camden, and to my complete surprise, the owner said he would immediately pull the Wine Nine off the shelves. In fact, he had me help him right then and there and let me listen as he called his wholesaler and asked him to come and exchange the bottles for UFW union brands. I tried to look as if this happened every day, but I was flabbergasted. It had never happened before or would happen again. We came by later to check, and not only was the store clean, he had even posted our leaflet explaining the issues in his front window. This elderly, working-class, Jewish shopkeeper had it all over those Princeton hypocrites.

We had the usual diverse crew on staff at the time, some I worked well with, some I frankly thought did more harm than good. Some were just plain colorful. Ulrich Kubish was a conscientious objector from the West German army who was shipped off to alternative service in the U.S. after refusing to pick up a gun. While a courageous and good-hearted person, he was ill suited to poverty work and was passed off from one organization to the other until he landed onto the Philly boycott under the auspices of the United Council of Churches. The “grittiness” of North Philly took its toll on poor Ulrich. He would call home with wide-eyed angst, emphasizing how he was living in “ze ghetto,” clearly oblivious, as I was, to the double meaning the word had to his German parents. He took to eating only rolled oats and canned peaches after finding a cockroach baked into the cheap store-bought bread we had. One morning we heard a blood-curdling scream and footsteps pounding from Ulrich’s room toward the second-story bathroom. Apparently, Ulrich had added another item to his consumables list and had taken his morning shot of whisky before opening his eyes. From what I could gather as he madly brushed his teeth with an entire tube of paste, a rather fat cockroach had been sitting in his shot glass that morning, and while Ulrich felt his tiny feet mightily trying to escape the determined gulp, the creature was unable to overcome the momentum of the swig. Soon after, we lost the best dressed and most stylishly coifed staff member I would ever work with.

We collected lettuce “pledges” as Don McLean’s “American Pie” topped the charts, and took on the Nixon Administration’s attempt to use the NLRB to shut down the boycott as Paul Simon released “Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard.” Personally, I had a great rush when the Republican congressman of the Bucks County district, who also chaired the Youth for Nixon committee, told me he had personally urged Tricky Dick to drop the NLRB attack on the UFW because even his safe district was getting loyal Republicans complaining how unfair it all was. He told me he had even named me to Nixon personally as the source of this grief. He might have just been blowing smoke up my skirt, but I felt as if I had just left my boot print on Satan’s behind. Naturally, there was the tireless work by scores of great supporters in Bucks County, and more than a little luck. The election before had caused hundreds of progressive activists to register Republican for some tactical reason, and they were still registered as such in 1972. Their leadership mobilized them to write scathing letters to Nixon and this congressman from hundreds of “loyal registered

Republicans.” This was in tandem with one of the congressman’s most important supporters putting pressure on him to take the matter up with Nixon. His daughter was a stalwart UFW supporter, and while her father was a conservative, she appealed to the attorney’s sense of legal fair play to get him to come around. I had two high school girls in southern Bucks County who mobilized dozens of classmates to get hundreds, maybe thousands, of letters written and sent. Jack Rowe and the Bucks County Vietnam Veterans Against the War got every working-class tavern and VFW hall writing letters and confronting any Republican politician who showed his face in the area. I was just proud to be part of their accomplishment.

But 1972 was ending badly with the re-election of Nixon, the boycott stalled in contract negotiations, and I was broke and exhausted. Jeanne, after having been so successful in raising many thousands of dollars for the service centers from the Walk for Development people all up and down the Eastern seaboard, was also getting weary. Frankly, my modest success and her substantial success had raised the ugly face of political jealousy in the office, and while Gil Padilla was there to see what was going on and protect us so we could do our work, it took its toll on our morale. After the NLRB campaign was over, and Gil left for California, the situation made further progress impossible. We both decided to quit and return to Oregon. I have tried, as I have gotten older, to understand the other points of view involved and be charitable, but I have watched petty politics too often drive some of the best people I have ever worked with out of the union. I find it even less forgivable now with my years of perspective than I did then.

After a few years working in factories and making some money, I once again got sucked into full-time work in the Portland boycott in 1975. We were fully engaged in a fight with the growers again, who had used the treachery of the Teamsters against us. Now we were fighting “the mob” as well as the growers. At the time, Teamster goons attacked our picket lines, including my fiancée, Jeanne, when I was away taking some signs to another picket line. The president of the Portland local of the Teamsters stood up in the AFL-CIO central labor council (of which they were not members, because of the Teamster’s mob connections) and threatened to kill, specifically, the Portland director, Rev. Veral Seagraves, and myself. Naturally, we didn’t back down, and eventually the whole thing blew over; but I have to admit I was extra watchful for a while. Happily, Jeanne and I were married in 1975, while I was on staff, in a ceremony conducted by Rev. Seagraves wearing a UFW eagle vestment, by her brother John, a Catholic priest, and by Rev. John Whiteneck, the man who originally told me about the movement. In 1976, after Prop 14, Veral left, and regional director Dale Van Pelt asked me to be director in Portland. Later, all staff was pulled in to California to work on Prop 14. I remember the trip down to San Diego with Dale because his car broke down in the middle of the night in Sacramento in a very tough neighborhood. Of course we had no money to fix it or get a room to stay in, so we hopped a fence and unrolled our sleeping bags in the only greenery we could find, the foliage under the freeway. As we went to sleep, I asked Dale if maybe they didn’t water this area at night, but we were too groggy to follow the line of thinking, until the hissing and drenching of the sprinklers awoke us.

Prop 14 was an experience so intense it would take a book by itself to document all the important insights it gave me. I was working with a team of directors under Scott Washburn, and we worked 20-hour days. Every day was hours of field work, organizing and registering Democrats. Every night, as our staffs slept, were endless planning meetings, leaving only a few hours of sleep a night. As the newest director, I was given the staff no one else wanted. My people were as good as or better than the rest, they were just out of favor because they wouldn't take any crap. One was a 50-year-old priest who didn't need to be humiliated by some 25-year-old hot shot ordering him around. With the proper respect, he did great work. Don Orange was also there. Being between jobs, he took the time to come on staff again and certainly didn't need to be told how to organize. My team was often the top-performing group, much to the chagrin of some. My team knew how to really work and didn't care about the credit.

Even though we got our asses kicked on Prop 14, I felt great about the work we did and was as charged as ever to stay in the union. We all went to La Paz to be debriefed and be reassigned. But I sensed something was clearly wrong, even though Nick Jones, now the national director of the boycott, held to the party line. I stayed and stayed, waiting to return to Oregon and rebuild the boycott operation. I began to complain and ask for some explanation. Someone met with me and offered me a place in the organizing department, quite a plum, but I had a new wife I wanted to have a life with. Besides, I really believed the boycott apparatus was an incredible asset to the union and wanted to see how the union would leverage its awesome power in the future. After weeks of being put off, I defied orders and went home. For weeks I waited for new orders but only got the run-around. Nick Jones couldn't be reached because, unbeknown to me, he was out. Only later did I hear that there was some internal letter he and Virginia wrote, and that some jerk released it to the press. I know Nick and Virginia, and I know some of their detractors, and I will tell you Nick and Virginia have my trust and loyalty. Climbers, sycophants, and Machiavellian politicians were doing to the union what they do in every successful organization: build little nests for themselves where they can suck the vigor out of the organization, drive away its best talent, and neutralize any talent left that can threaten them. My degree is in business management, and there are entire college courses dedicated to dealing with this phenomenon every organization is prey to; but for the UFW, I never understood why they would bother. I wanted to slap them and tell them, "Do you understand there is nothing here to steal? Do you understand we work for room and board and \$10 a week? Go away and do this to Safeway, where there is something to gain!"

A couple of years later, while I was working in a factory and trying to build a life for Jeanne and me, an old pal from the boycott, Mike Eagan, met me in Portland and convinced me things were changing back to fighting form in the union. Even though the boycott, much to my distress, had been dismantled, he told me the new California farm labor law was making the field offices the place to be. I dearly missed the union, and had become a bit depressed over its present course. Mike gave me hope that things were getting back to the way they were. Because I had left La Paz against orders in '76, I needed someone to

smooth things over with Cesar and me; my old hero, the silver fox, Gil Padilla, stepped in and got me re-hired. I was sent down to the San Ysidro field office to work with Mike Egan, but before I arrived, Mike was reassigned, and I found myself working once again for Scott Washburn. Because I was able to read English, Scott put me in charge of the legal effort in San Ysidro, and I worked under the remote supervision of Jerry Cohen. At first I was asked to investigate and file unfair labor practice charges under the new law. Later, when the charges were going to

hearings and no legal talent was forthcoming from Salinas, I was asked to sit in and take notes at the hearings as the union's legal representative. Several times I was forced to take an active role prosecuting the cases when the ALRB attorney, one in particular, dropped the ball and froze up in the hearing. Eventually, I was even asked to write briefs, but when they saw what I produced they finally sent down Mike Heuman, a real lawyer. You have to be a real lawyer to write briefs. I went back to filing ULPs.

One nursery, San Diego Nursery, was organized solely by a worker, Maria Elena Lopez, and me filing ULPs. She came to me asking to help her organize, but the field office was stretched too thin to take on another organizing drive, so she just started organizing it herself. When the inevitable retribution began, I filed ULPs for every single infraction of the law. The company, unwilling to take the plump, uneducated Maria Elena seriously, treated her like a silly but harmless middle-aged woman. Me, they just ignored. Soon the ULPs began to pile up, and the lawyers began to take notice. By that time, she and I had collected enough cards to force an election. Between the election, the mountain of ULPs, and the complete denial they were in, the election went forward with no hitches, and the UFW won handily. The company was caught completely off guard. This isn't supposed to happen; some little farmworker woman just did it all herself with just a bit of help from some guy who isn't even a real lawyer.

I don't know what the reason was, but I was soon shipped off to the Coachella valley to do administration, usually a low-status job. Now I will admit I felt as if I had been demoted, but I also recognized that admin is really a crucial task that doesn't get the respect it deserves, and Coachella was a critical field office, if not the most critical at the time. In fact, now that I am more mature and more self-confident in my abilities, I wouldn't mind taking it on again. But at the time, I felt it was a political move by someone who, for whatever reason, just didn't like me. Other discouraging things were going on in the union as well, sapping my enthusiasm.

In Coachella, I worked for Ruth Shy, a former boycott director, first-rate human being, and very sharp organizer. I worked hard to make the best of my new situation and the perceived blow to my career in the union. I confronted my own hang-ups on the status of my position, and after a false start or two, got into the work of supporting the staff doing the union's work. Soon, however, summer hit with 120 degree temperatures. The union assigned Jeanne and me to live in a single-wide trailer in a dilapidated trailer park. Now, UFW housing was always pretty poverty-stricken, but I had never known it to be dangerous. This trailer had an old swamp cooler that had ceased to function in any

meaningful way, rendering the trailer uninhabitable. We slept on the couch in the clinic staff's apartment for months, our bags in the trunk of the 1963 Plymouth Valiant the union assigned me.

Finally, word reached us that the union had decided they had to become more family-friendly. Jeanne had wanted to start a family, and this seemed like a perfect time, the thought being that if we were expecting, the union would put more effort into taking care of our needs. We were told that Richard Chavez himself took up our case and sacrificed the air conditioner in his own office to get us back into the trailer while the union had me look for an apartment. But some of the internal politics in La Paz, not related to us specifically, slowed everything to a crawl as Jeanne's morning sickness made her more miserable. The union leadership, knowing there was a problem somewhere in the organization as a whole, tried various things to get to the bottom of the numerous disconnects that internal politics had created. I had the luck to be chosen to go to La Paz to play "the Game," and, naturally, I ended up in Cesar's group. I tried to bring up some legitimate issues in a positive and tactful way, but was met with blistering personal attacks by people I didn't even know. Cesar didn't know what to make of it all and was stroked and flattered until even I wasn't sure what to think. Cesar even came and talked to me privately, remembering that I had had the *juevos* to walk out of La Paz in '76, so maybe I would give him the straight talk he needed. I did just that, forcefully, but I think, tactfully. It just occurred to me as I write this that it was the last time we spoke one-on-one. In the years since then I had seen him speak and had even been in the room with him, but that was our last conversation.

I think I did a fine job in Coachella, but my attitude was clearly deteriorating, and it embarrassed me to have Ruth Shy see it. As Jeanne's morning sickness got worse, and the promised apartment kept getting pushed farther out, I finally decided I had to leave and get Jeanne where she could be more comfortable, someplace more "family-friendly." We returned to the house I owned in Oregon.

I did what I could to help the union in the years to come, but also watched with dismay as the people I most respected left the union: Gil Padilla, Marshall Ganz, Jessica Govea, Eliseo Medina, Philip Vera Cruz, Jerry Cohen, and Chris Hartmire. I also was not blind to the various low-lives, anti-Semites, and liars who weaseled their way into positions of influence. Still, I saw people like Artie Rodriguez and Oscar Mondragon survive and prosper, whom I believe to be stand-up guys. Maybe things will be all right after all. Maybe it's up to us all to see to it.

Jeanne McNassar

I began picketing on behalf of the UFWOC at age 15 in 1968 as a boycott supporter in the suburbs of Chicago. At 17, in 1970, my family moved to the Portland, Oregon-area suburbs. On the day that I went to my new high school to register, I spotted a tall, thin, dark-haired boy waiting in line at the entrance to the cafeteria. My interest was peaked right

away, noticing that he wore several farmworker buttons and also was very cute. I followed him, trying my best to cross paths with him, ask for directions, strike up a political discussion, or anything to get him to notice me. Finally, after three long weeks, he took note of the "Boycott lettuce" button I wore on my sweater and introduced himself as Joe Digman. Our first date of course was a UFWOC picket line. I joined his crew of suburban high school kids who traveled to Portland every Saturday to picket stores, eat donuts, sing songs, and to educate shoppers about the struggle of farmworkers. Joe and I came to know each other very well in the course of this pastime and indeed fell in love. In fact now that I am older, wiser, and have learned the value of life-changing moments, I have counted almost 35 years since the day we fell in love at first sight. I especially enjoyed store checks with him. He was on the speech team and could artfully keep any produce manager distracted with long and passionate oratories about the rights of farmworkers. I knew when I saw his arms waving above his head that indeed our victim was mesmerized, and it was time for me to slip into the produce cooler to count non-union versus union lettuce labels.

At the end of our senior year, we became full-time volunteers for the Portland boycott committee and worked with Kate Barton and Don Orange. In December of 1971, we were sent to Philadelphia to work with Richard Trejo and Ernie Powell. For several weeks, Gilbert Padilla led us in challenging the Republicans and Nixon Administration who attempted to take away our right to boycott. In another campaign that year, we spent many hours picketing specialty wine stores on the "Wine Nine Boycott." I think I still have those growers memorized...let's see, Weibel, Wentz, Kornel, Korbel, Mondavi, Martini, Beringer, Krug, and Sebastiani. Well, that's all nine, but Joe, who is sitting here with me, had to help. I also kept busy in Philadelphia working with community organizations. Several supporters who were helping me were also involved with the "Walk for Development." I worked in conjunction with this group for several months, persuading them to sponsor the UFW as a beneficiary of their fund-raising activities. Other boycott committees throughout the country followed suit, and between all our efforts many thousands of dollars were raised for the Martin Luther King Service Centers.

I had only worked full time for the UFWOC for one year when the intensity of the work left me exhausted. I followed Joe back to Portland, where we were married in 1975. In the months leading up to our wedding, our picket lines against scab grapes and Gallo wines were being attacked by Teamster goons, and several of us were arrested protesting their abuse of farmworkers. In 1977 I followed Joe to the San Ysidro and Coachella field offices. On a visit to the Coachella UFW clinic, we discovered with great delight that I was pregnant with our first child, Veronica, who is now entering law school to become a civil rights and immigration attorney. We still keep the obstetrician's business card in her baby book. Printed on the red card is the name, Patrick Dowling, M.D., and a black Aztec eagle in the center. Altogether we spent 10 years in the movement; most of them I spent as a supporter in conjunction with Joe's work.

It was a great privilege and a gift to me to be able to take part in this movement. My most memorable experience was spending a week in La Paz as part of a large group of boycott

volunteers being trained by Cesar Chavez. This experience has shaped the rest of my life. I have spent my career as a teacher working with young low-income children, including eight years in Migrant Head Start. I completed a Master's thesis last year entitled, "A Head Start Program's Response to the Cultural, Linguistic and Developmental Needs of Young Indigenous Mayan Children." It is the only academic research in existence on the education of trilingual farmworker children. The research is currently being used to apply for federal grants to serve these children. Presently, I am teaching bilingual homeless children at a school located just off Avenida Cesar Chavez in South Albuquerque. The other day I asked a young Latina teacher I work with if she would believe me if I told her I had met Cesar Chavez. She said she didn't know who he was, but had heard he was a Mexican Mafia boss. The process of educating goes on...