

## Claire Walter Montoya 1972–1974

I was sent to the United Farm Workers headquarters in La Paz, California from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, (70 miles east of Pittsburgh) in March of 1972 by the Church of the Brethren Volunteer Service and worked there until May of 1974.

I grew up in the Church of the Brethren and had wanted to join BVS after hearing about it at a church camp because I wanted to do something to make a difference with my life. Originally, I wanted to join BVS after high school, but my dad convinced me that I would have more to offer if I was a little older and had some education. I graduated from UPJ with a degree in elementary education in December of 1971 and joined BVS in February of 1972.

During the BVS orientation I chose the UFW as my assignment from a list of placements available. I chose this assignment without really knowing a lot about the UFW. I was given the opportunity to do some research about the UFW, so I knew a little about the grape boycott but not much. The assignment as listed was to work in a daycare center for the children of people working in the offices at La Paz. I thought this would be a good use of my education degree. Also, I had taken Spanish classes in both high school and college and thought I might make some use of that. Finally, my father was a sociology professor at the time at UPJ and had impressed on us the importance of organizations like the UFW.

My assignment was only for one year, but I stayed on for a second year.

When I got to La Paz, there was no daycare center set up yet, so I was assigned the job of babysitting Nick and Virginia Jones' two young children, Raquel and Martin. Nick was one of Cesar's guards and Virginia worked in the boycott office. Because of the irregular hours of their jobs, my hours were also irregular. The regular office hours were 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, but Nick was usually with Cesar, and Virginia frequently worked evenings calling the East Coast offices. I got the kids up and fixed breakfast for them, entertained them for the morning, got lunch for them (at their place or the cafeteria when it was open), watched them for the afternoon, and most days, got dinner for them. Virginia checked in on them throughout the day. If she was calling the East Coast offices in the evening, I got the kids ready for bed, too.

One month the kids went to visit their cousins in Fresno, so I was put to work in the accounting office while they were away. I had no training in accounting, but I learned the job and never went back to watching the kids. I did bank reconciliation for 40 boycott offices, 30 field offices, and all of the La Paz offices. The offices sent a copy of their expense sheets to us, and the banks sent all the bank statements to us. Everything was done on adding machines, not calculators, and all the reconciliation had to be done by the tenth of the month. Because of the deadline we often worked 16- to 20-hour days the first two weeks of the month. The man in charge of the accounting office at that time was Jack Quigley. The other people in the office were Judy, Anne Washburn, Ralph Magana, and

Juan Lopez. Ralph and Juan worked on the credit union and medical plan books.

Cesar wanted to know what all the money in the offices was being spent on, by category, so the books had to have every expense category listed for each office. Then there was a cover page for each section so he could know what *all* the field offices or *all* the boycott offices were spending in each category. Then there was an overall cover sheet so he could know what was being spent on any given category in the entire union. The ledger was more than 4 inches thick. Even 30 years later, I remember some of the codes!

In the evenings I worked on the switchboard answering and connecting calls. Some of the East Coast offices could only call after most of the La Paz offices had closed. A lot of the people working at La Paz had family on the East Coast, too, so the phones were used after office hours. It was interesting to see who called whom. The switchboard operators were the first to know who was dating whom! Also, when the guards were somewhere with Cesar, we sometimes were asked to ride around the compound at night on guard duty. I guess we were looking for intruders, but I don't know what we would have done if we had seen anyone.

Occasionally I got out of the accounting office. One day during the strike of 1972 or 1973 I got to go to the bank in Delano to deposit a check for \$300,000 from the United Auto Workers.

One summer I got to go to Calexico for a weekend to help pay strikers' benefits. We also attended rallies and meetings at La Paz and rallies in other towns nearby. On Sundays we were often expected to go to Los Angeles or Bakersfield to stand in front of supermarkets and ask people to boycott lettuce or grapes. Once or twice when Ruben drove busloads of farmworkers to rallies, I rode along.

Most of my memories of being with the union have more to do with the life at La Paz than with the political ramifications. I didn't fully understand the importance and social significance of what we were doing at the time. I knew the union was making a difference in the lives of the migrant farmworkers but not that it was so radical.

I lived in the hospital, along with most of the other single volunteers. The rooms had no locks on the doors. The first weekend I was there a group of people were staying at the hospital for the weekend and someone took my last \$20. Fortunately, I didn't need to pay for meals, so I was OK until I got paid. Also, that first weekend, Virginia had to work late, so I had to work late. I missed supper for two nights because the cafeteria was closed by the time I got there. Living in the hospital was like living in a co-ed dorm. There was only one bathroom on our floor, which had toilets, a shower, and a bath. Once in a while when we went to use the bathroom we would find Clyde Golden taking a bath by candlelight.

My dog was born under the hospital. She and her littermates were pulled up through an opening in the floor when we heard them crying.

Another memorable event was the Halloween party that was held each year. I had never been to an adult costume party before. Since we were all volunteers, no one had money to spend for a costume. The costumes were either homemade or something people had worn in "the real world." Warren Bonta came dressed as a Methodist minister, Anna Puharich came dressed as a nun. The people who ran the daycare center came as two black eagles, with their baby as an eaglet. Ruben wore his old army uniform. I made a mask from papier-mâché and wore a sheet. Prizes were given for some of the costumes. The prizes were things people really needed, like a tank of gas, movie passes, or a bottle of wine. Ruben and I were sitting together at a table. They announced that one of the prizes went to "War and Death," and when we looked around to see who it was, it was us.

I remember long meetings in the evenings where everything had to be discussed in at least two and sometimes three languages. I remember seeing performances by *El Teatro Campesino*. I remember taking Martin and Raquel swimming in the pool before Cesar closed it because he didn't want the visiting farmworkers to think the people living in La Paz had an easy life. One time it snowed there, and all of the native Californians quit work and ran outside. Many had never seen snow falling before.

Some of the people I remember living there at that time include Glen and Sue Percy, Lupe and Kathy Murguia, Venustiano and Kathy Olguin, Maria Saludado, Carlos and Linda LeGerrette, Maria Rifo, Ramon Romero, Paul Jacobs, Dave Smith, John Gibson, Fred Patch, Blase Bonpane, and LeRoy and Bonnie Chatfield, as well as the spouses of the people in accounting. Jim Lefever was another BVS'er who was assigned to the UFW. Cesar and his family and Dolores Huerta and her family were there, too. Other faces come to mind, but I can't remember their names.

The thing that changed my life the most was meeting Ruben while at La Paz. At the time the kitchen was not serving meals but was open to the people who lived there. There was a co-op group where anyone who wanted to contributed their food allowance and took turns cooking meals. The group got together and decided who was to cook and what to have each day. Ruben and I were assigned to cook Tuesday breakfast together. After we got to know one another, Ruben would help me with the Jones kids by taking us to Tehachapi or Bakersfield sometimes. When he was working in the office of *El Malcriado*, I would help by doing headlines for the paper. We got married at La Paz in the newly renovated conference room. We stayed with the union until May of 1974 and then went to Pennsylvania.

We have stayed in Johnstown since coming back to Pennsylvania. Ruben worked as a printer and layout artist for several years and then ran screen shops for a sporting goods store and a silkscreen shop. He now has his own screen shop. All of these jobs were jobs he had done for the union, too. I worked as a bookkeeper for two years before being hired as a teacher. When I applied for the bookkeeping job I didn't know any of the bookkeeping terms because I had learned everything I knew on the job at La Paz. The bookkeeping skills I learned I have been using ever since; I am the treasurer for several organizations. I have been teaching in the Greater Johnstown School District since

February of 1976.

Living with the union made me much more socially aware. My life would not have been the same if I had not gone to La Paz and worked for the UFW.