

## Steven D. Burton 1972–1975

As I sit in my study today, on the wall behind me is a 30-year-old original poster from a fundraising event for “The California Grape Workers” held at Carnegie Hall in New York City. How I came to own that poster is part of the story of my involvement with the union.

I had just graduated from law school. The grape and lettuce boycotts were in full swing in New York. I wanted to get involved and someone gave me the phone number of Anna Puharich (a.k.a. Ann Israel). So I called and introduced myself and was invited to a meeting where I was eventually vetted by Anna and Marshall Ganz.

One of the things that Anna told me that they needed help with was the collection of royalties from the sale of the poster. Upon filing suit we learned that the distributor had gone bankrupt but that we could get back the remaining posters. I was fortunate enough to receive one of them.

My next call came when the D’Arrigo Brothers were seeking an injunction prohibiting picketing at the Hunts Point Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Market in the Bronx. After making several 5 a.m. trips to the market to get the lay of the land, I found myself in the Bronx Supreme Court (the trial level court in New York) accompanied by none other than Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez to argue against the granting of the injunction. It was only the second time I had been in court and the first time that I had argued an injunction. We were successful!

Not long after that I received a call from Jerry Cohen and began arguing injunction cases up and down the East Coast. It was exhilarating. Within a year, existing UFW contracts expired, the Gallo boycott began, and Jerry asked if I could come to California. I did exactly that.

This led me to La Paz where I had the opportunity to work directly with Cesar. While I’m sure that everyone has their own favorite Cesar story, this is mine: Earl Warren, the former chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and a former governor of California, had just died, and Cesar asked me to say something at the community meeting that night. I asked Cesar whether he was sure he wanted me to say something about the man who was responsible for the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II. Caesar looked at me somewhat astonished and said, “Surely you can find something positive to say about Justice Warren, and if you can’t, don’t say anything at all.” The advice was not novel, but I have never forgotten it, nor have I forgotten the source from which I heard it.

The other memory that remains particularly vivid was during the ALRB hearing for the Gallo strikers whom I had the honor of representing. Gallo’s lawyers were giving one of the farmworkers a particularly difficult time when the man stood up and said, “Just a minute, you have no right to talk to me like that. I am a man just like you.” A moment of dignity that I have never forgotten.

When I gave up the practice of law after 25 years to become a full-time congregational rabbi, I told my family and friends that I was in fact returning to my roots. I explained how the most meaningful years of law had been the ones that I spent with the union; that I was returning to the call to serve other people—a calling that I first learned about and experienced in my days with the UFW.