

Roberta (Robbie) Jaffe 1972–1975

UFW in Florida

In the early 1970s the UFW came to Florida. Led by Cesar's cousin, Manuel Chavez, an organizing drive began in the Deep South. Florida's modern agriculture—citrus, sugar cane, tomatoes, watermelons—was still rooted in the culture of plantation days' slavery. Grower-owned farmworker housing was often called “quarters,” a derivative of “slave quarters.” The relationship between the black farmworkers and the “boss-man” rang of an embedded prejudice yet a dependency on each other. On one hand, the grower provided the work and the basic necessities of shelter. The workers harvested the crops. The system that Florida farmworkers were part of was well documented in a CBS documentary, Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* (1960), and in Chet Huntley's *Migrant: An NBC White Paper* (1970). In the NBC documentary, one of the citrus growers, in talking about the farmworkers, said: “Our darkies, as we use to call them ...”

I don't know what was behind the decision to organize in Florida. I do know the UFW was entering a different system than in California. In Florida, farmworkers were mainly black and most were descendents of families that had been living and working in the rural South for generations, many before the abolishment of slavery. A much smaller percentage of Florida's agricultural workers were immigrant Mexicans and Anglos. The *bracero* program did not have a major impact in Florida; however, the importing of Jamaicans to harvest the sugar cane was an essential component of the large sugar industry surrounding Lake Okeechobee. Cesar's name was not a household word; the political awareness that the UFW developed among California farmworkers had not yet developed along the Florida migrant trail.

I was a sociology major at University of South Florida in Tampa. The social context at this time—even in Florida—was one of social change and action. The student movement, anti-Vietnam War sentiment, and women's movement filled the air with a dialogue of questioning and change. I was ready to be involved but still searching for something to get involved with. My statistics professor, Richard Gagan, and his wife, Susie, were involved with the fledgling UFW organizing committee forming in Florida. They started bringing in students to join them in different efforts. This, from my perspective, became the base of both organizing and boycott efforts in Florida. A fellow student, Nancy Hickey, and I joined the UFW as staff by the spring of 1972 and were part of an initial team of Florida farmworkers, California organizers, and the Gagans. This team was to grow to include priests, nuns, ministers, lawyers, union supporters—similar to the kind of support the UFW developed in California.

The organizing of Florida farm labor got off to a quick start. The initial target was Minute Maid orange juice—not only the largest orange grower in the state, but also a subsidiary of Coca-Cola. Coke was not interested in bad publicity about the conditions their farmworkers lived and worked under. We worked with the organizers going house to

house in the farming communities and talking about workers' rights and getting them to sign National Labor Relations Board election cards. As always, leadership came forward from the communities too, some becoming part of the organizing team. In the spring of 1972 an election certified the UFW as the union for the Coca-Cola Minute Maid harvesters.

After Coke agreed to negotiate, we held meetings in communities across the citrus belt of Florida. (This was the central region based in Orlando and running the width of the state from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico.) These meetings were transforming events for many of the workers. They had never been asked before about how they wanted their working conditions to change; what they thought a fair wage would be. I remember being strongly impacted by these meetings. The process of watching individuals being empowered and clearly being able to discuss their issues was transforming for me, a middle-class college graduate. I watched and helped where I could. Little did I know that in a few years I would be picking citrus under the Coke contract!

Around the same time the Coke organizing was taking place in central Florida, worker action began in the sugar cane fields in the southeastern part of the state near Lake Okeechobee. Large corporations controlled the sugar industry. During harvest season (November-May) thousands of Jamaican men were imported to cut the cane. These laborers lived in company housing isolated from any towns and were dependent on the company store and transportation. At the end of the season they were sent back to Jamaica. These workers were not in a position to complain, much less strike. However, the truck drivers, mainly Cuban immigrants living in Miami, were ready to protest their work conditions. The truck drivers from Talisman Sugar Company went on strike and asked the UFW to represent them. Manuel Chavez and his organizing team met with the sugar cane workers, and soon we were involved with supporting the strike.

The workers on the picket line were joined by UFW supporters. We could smell the sickening sweet smell of sugar being processed in nearby plants. Scab drivers drove their large trucks hauling the cane from the field to the plant. They speeded by us often with angry remarks. And one day, the ultimate tragedy happened. A young college woman from New College in Sarasota, an active supporter of the boycott, was run over on the picket line and died. This was the first death of a UFW supporter nationwide. It was a tragic event for the UFW, the family, and the fledgling Florida effort.

My role focused on the boycott—which at that time was on the Napa Valley wine grapes. The boycott efforts were linked to directions from the California central office under the leadership of Marshall Ganz. We started our work in Tampa—building support by talking to classes at the university, meeting with clergy, picketing markets. It became evident, though, that the big event was soon coming to Miami: the Democratic National Convention would be held in Miami Beach in the summer of 1972. We convinced California headquarters that we should move the boycott operation to Miami and plan to organize around the upcoming convention.

The 1972 Democratic convention was about social change. It was a time of bringing the women's movement to the forefront, with women actively taking a political role. Due to a change in how delegates were selected, for the first time the southern states had delegations with strong black representation. George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey were the major contenders for the nomination. For the UFW it was the time of the lettuce boycott when strikes were happening throughout the Salinas Valley and being supported by a nationwide consumer boycott of lettuce.

We had our action plan for the convention. Farmworkers from around Florida came into Miami. A church gave us its hall to house everyone. Somehow we got cots and food organized. (How did we do it all?) We divided up into teams and each team was assigned to make presentations to different state delegations. Our goal was to get each delegation's endorsement of the lettuce boycott and then to ask them to announce it from the convention floor. The success of our effort was beyond expectation. Delegation after delegation announced their support of the lettuce boycott along with the votes they were casting. So, the casting of votes might have sounded like this: "The Great State of Illinois casts xx votes for Hubert Humphrey and xx votes for George McGovern, but we are unanimous, 100% support for the lettuce boycott!" This was broadcast over national television over and over again. We were ecstatic. It was a truly grassroots effort involving Florida farmworkers, California farmworkers turned organizers, and Miami boycott supporters. Cesar's name was even brought forward on the convention floor as a possible vice-president nominee.

Prior to the convention, Eliseo Medina and Dorothy Johnson arrived in Florida to lead the state in both the organizing and boycott efforts. Eliseo became my mentor, teaching me organizing strategies and empowering me to set up effective boycott efforts. After all of these years of education, I was finally getting the education I really wanted! The Miami UFW house was a center for both statewide boycott efforts and a key base for organizers when they were in the area. Eliseo brought with him a team of organizers to continue Florida's efforts and to start setting up service centers to meet some of the social service needs of the migrant communities. Every region of Florida had significant agriculture, and the interchange between city and rural areas made both the boycott and organizing efforts dynamic and interactive. While we worked long and hard, we also had fun together, too. I remember a time at the Miami house, when one of the organizers, Jose Luna, stayed at home to cook dinner for all of us while the rest of us went about our regular work. We came home hungry to a steaming stew that Jose had cooked up. Jose was like a Buddha to me with his big round belly and his all-knowing smile. He stood back as we all filled our bowls and sat down to eat. Then he rolled with laughter as all of us gringos took a bite and immediately ran for water with steam coming from our ears! There was so much for all of us to learn—and we had different ways of teaching, too.

The Miami boycott got off to a great start with the Democratic convention. The ongoing work was probably similar to most cities. We made presentations, got endorsements, involved people, picketed stores, and put on fundraising events. There was an active

Christian Migrant Ministry headed by Augie Vanden Bosche and Frank Smith. The Catholic Church was strongly involved, with some priests and nuns becoming very active. Father Frank O'Loughlin, who was a parish priest in Hialeah, focused much of his energy on the UFW, involving the parish youth groups and actively being involved in organizing. Rabbis and temple youth groups also actively engaged in boycott support. The AFL-CIO was also very engaged and supportive. I remember nervously doing presentations to the AFL-CIO council and individual union locals—always getting their endorsement and a financial contribution.

While there was a lot of potential support in Miami, there were definitely the challenges, too. I remember one such instance when I was making a presentation to a class at Florida International University. The instructor had invited a local grower and me to talk to the class. I started by showing the NBC documentary, *Migrant: An NBC White Paper* (1970). I knew I was in for a tough time when the class started questioning statistics presented in the documentary. However, the ante was further raised when the grower started his talk by accusing the UFW of contaminating the water in an area migrant camp that had led to a recent outbreak of typhoid in the camp! There was so much about this experience that was learning on my feet. Sometimes I stood up—and sometimes I am still bewildered.

The early 1970s were tumultuous times. Despite (or maybe because of) the populist movement that dominated the Democratic convention, McGovern lost by a landslide to Richard Nixon. The UFW table grape contracts expired and the California growers signed “sweetheart” contracts with the Teamsters. The grape boycott was re-initiated, and many of the Florida organizers and boycott staff were sent to Ohio. I stayed in Miami, holding down the boycott efforts there. Meanwhile, Nixon pulled the U.S. troops back from Vietnam. Nixon committed crimes that included breaking into Democratic headquarters during the campaign. His presidency began to unravel in 1973 as Watergate was uncovered. I remember being mesmerized by the congressional hearings and also feeling the exhaustion and burnout of non-stop working for the union. I decided to leave the UFW staff in the fall of 1973.

I wanted to leave Florida and take a break from all that I had been involved with. I moved to Madison, Wisconsin—temporarily. Jerry Kay was sent from California to take my place heading up the Florida boycott. We met in December of 1973 on a return visit to Florida. By the following spring I was back in Miami and Jerry and I were developing our relationship as he continued to work for the UFW and I became an active supporter while I worked for the retail clerks union. The efforts in Florida continued both in the boycott, servicing the Coca-Cola/Minute Maid contract, and in further organizing attempts. Jerry and I were both ready for a change. For the 1974-75 harvesting season (November-May) we decided to be citrus pickers in central Florida. We moved to Apopka—20 miles north of Orlando. We lived among other farmworkers—on the “other” side of the tracks. We learned how to pick up jobs with different crews and which crew leaders could really come through with the jobs. We put our names in at the UFW hiring hall to get on a union crew at Coca-Cola. My understanding of what I had been trying to do on the boycott deepened.

How interesting that many of the workers in California became boycott organizers to spread the word. I became a temporary farmworker for many reasons—among them to better understand what I had been fighting for. The boycott brochures describing the statistics related to farmworkers' lives, from their life expectancy to their annual income, could never do justice to the hardships of their work and their lives in poverty. Getting on a crew in itself was a challenge. Once on a harvest crew, you would be on the road before dawn, sometimes driving for hours to the intended grove. Once you arrived, you would wait until the company foreman decided whether the grove and the weather were right for harvesting. You only got paid for what you picked—so wait time was about hoping.

The work was arduous. Heavy, long wooden ladders and canvas harvest bags were the tools of the trade. Once we would enter a grove, we would take ladders and move them around the tree. We climbed up the ladders to pick the fruit into the bags; down to dump the heavy bags into large bins. The foreman would punch our card every time he hauled one of our bins away (which in Jerry's and my case was not very often!).

There was a tremendous difference in working for a UFW crew and a non-union crew. The work and the workers were steadier. Before entering the grove, the price per bin was negotiated. The crew leader was a union worker too—on our side and not there to make money off of us. I was in awe of the regular workers on our crew. They demonstrated athletic prowess in their ability to harvest the trees with agility as they moved the heavy ladder and juggled the fruit into the bag hanging from their shoulder. At the end of a long day, Jerry and I would be covered in dirt from head to toe as we battled the tree for its fruit. For our work we were lucky to make \$12 between us. Meanwhile, other workers on the UFW crew would still be spotless and have earned individually eight times as much as our day's earnings put together.

Throughout our time as harvesters we were deeply involved with UFW activities in central Florida. Diana and Mack Lyons were in charge of the contract implementation and the UFW service center. We were regularly involved in meetings, planning, and events. We also worked closely with the Sisters of Notre Dame, the "Apopka Nuns" who established a farmworker center in Apopka. To this day, they are landmarks in the region dedicated to their community work. Being part of the farmworker community, although temporarily, showed me the potential impact of the UFW and the positive change that occurs when individuals take it upon themselves to organize and work together to change their situation.

In the summer of 1975, Jerry and I left Apopka to head west to California. As we drove through the Salinas Valley, I recognized the crops and the companies—Bud Antle, D'Arrigo Brothers, and others that we had boycotted. We drove north of Salinas to a rural area where we started a small organic farm. I had become involved with the UFW as an idealistic college graduate—ready to change other people's lives. In retrospect, the UFW did have an impact in Florida, but not a permanent staying power. On the other hand, the UFW's impact on my life has been everlasting.

Epilogue

It's December 26, 2003. I am sitting at the kitchen table at our family vineyard in the Cuyama Valley, California, where we are part-time farmers. I know I am not the only former UFW staffer reflecting on those organizing days as the deadline for our stories approaches. A few years ago I was in Orlando for a convention. I decided to rent a car and take a trip through the back roads of Florida to see the people and places that were part of my UFW days. It is easy to travel through Florida and avoid these back roads. The two coasts are highly developed with interstate highways carrying travelers to their destination. A turnpike runs through the center of the state. Orlando, from the early development of Disney World in the 1970s has grown exponentially to become a major tourist destination. Yet the back roads still exist. The citrus groves and tomato fields are still there. Migrant camps still surround the Magic Kingdom. I drove southwest on the interstate toward Naples and then turned inland toward the swampland of the Everglades. Soon I was in Immokolee. Though I could see the encroachment of housing from Naples and Ft. Meyers, Immokolee was still a poor Florida agricultural community of tomato fields. I remembered how the Rodriguez family was one of the first in the state to step forward and join and support the UFW. I remembered the parish priest, Jerry Singleton, who worked with the farmworkers and encouraged them to support the union.

I drove on through areas of Florida most residents and travelers never see. I drove through Ben Hill Griffin country. His footprint is still bold and strong in representing the citrus industry and would, I imagine, oppose the UFW as strongly today as he did in the 1970s. I passed through small town after small town where as UFW organizers we had met side by side with the workers. The ghosts were still there—25 years later. I visited with Nancy Hickey, my compatriot in the boycott days. Together we went to visit our former professor, Richard Gagan, who had initially involved us in the UFW. How wonderful to be able to tell him of the impact he had on my life choices. I drove across central Florida to Lake Okeechobee. The sugar mills were still there. I met Father Frank O'Loughlin at a restaurant in Belle Glade that had been a hallmark of U.S. Sugar's plantation days. Frank was the Hialeah priest who had been active in the boycott. This led him to a lifetime of work supporting and working with Florida farmworkers and immigrants. He became the parish priest in the Okeechobee town of Indiantown, where he developed a safe haven for Guatemalan immigrants. He continues to be an ardent supporter of Haitian and Guatemalan immigrants' rights. I ended my road journey back in Apopka at the home of the Apopka nuns. Apopka has become a bedroom community for Orlando. However, the Sisters of Notre Dame—Teresa, Kathy, Anne, Gail—were still there supporting the farmworkers in the community with more sophisticated programs, but similar actions to those started in the 1970s.

Looking back on my journey, it made sense. It almost looks like a direct path once I stepped onto the UFW roadmap. My work since then has been entwined with organic agriculture, education, and social change. As mentioned earlier, Jerry and I became organic farmers in Watsonville, California, in 1975. We were initiators of several of the farmers'

markets in the Monterey Bay area. Our paths separated, and I went on to start Life Lab Science Program, a nonprofit education organization whose mission was to establish school garden programs for the teaching of science. This effort, rooted in my experience with the UFW and the respect I had for growing food and the people who worked the land, came full circle when I initiated a program to work with Salinas Valley schools on using gardens as a vehicle for teaching science and English language development to children of farmworkers. This program focused on the family knowledge of the land as a base for learning and continues to produce exciting results. For me, it symbolizes a tribute to Cesar and the UFW—my contribution back to all that I was taught in my work with the UFW. My commitment to social action for workers' rights also continues. My husband, Steve Gliessman, and I are working with rural communities in Latin America that are suffering in the international coffee crisis. We are working with coffee cooperatives to improve farmers' livelihoods by establishing direct markets for their coffee and to work with these farmers on using environmentally sound farming practices. In addition, we apply our work to our own land as we work with our chaparral ecosystem to dry farm grapes to make wine on a small-scale farm. From a love of the land to a respect for the people who work the land, the roots of the UFW run deep and have had a profound impact on me.