

Martha Diepenbrock 1972–1976

Reflections of a SF Bay Area Boycotter

A month after enrolling at UC Santa Cruz as a freshman, I was persuaded to travel over the rather dangerous highway from Santa Cruz to San Jose on a rainy night to attend an orientation meeting for volunteers interested in defeating Proposition 22. Jody (my best buddy from high school, who was also at UCSC), her roommate Margo McBane (who had recruited us both), and I got there in time to attend a meeting in a crowded church hall that was being run by the then Larry Tramutt. Larry, attired in a plaid flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows, was laying out the ways volunteers would be organized to defeat the proposition. Jody, Margo, and I traveled over the mountains on weekends in October as part of the mobilization that successfully defeated the initiative. Just days after the election, Margo persuaded Jody and me to join her in a six-month commitment to the UFW that, she explained, could be accredited through the UCSC's community studies program. Jody and I made arrangements for a three-month field study placement with the Santa Clara County UFW staff and promptly left UCSC, never to return.

Learning to Forage

I started as a full-time volunteer in January of 1973 and was assigned to shadow David Foster, one of Santa Clara County's veteran organizers for my first couple of days. As we traveled back to the boycott house from Milpitas at the end of a day of personal visits, I was rather surprised when David pulled over in front of a field of wild mustard growing alongside Highway 238, with the comment that he was in charge of dinner that night and that we needed to pick enough greens for the household. I had been totally on board with the \$5 a week, plus room and board compensation plan, but was ready to quit, knowing I did not have the skill or ability to forage for food, particularly in the mostly urban environment of Santa Clara County. I was much relieved to learn the Santa Clara Boycott house had a very sophisticated system of pooling the \$5 per boycotter for food money, which involved shopping at the flea market, menu planning, and rotating cooking and clean-up assignments.

Finding a Huelga Mother

A year or so later, I was assigned as the organizer for Palo Alto, where I spent a couple of years working with supporters from Stanford University, Presbyterian and Unitarian churches, and students like John Brown (although there were no other students or supporters like John Brown) from Gunn and Paly high schools to picket the major Safeway on Middlefield Road, and occasionally to venture into the unfriendly territory of the Menlo Park Safeway. My base of operations was the home of Rosemary and Verne Cooperrider, long-time supporters of the UFW and involved with the Farm Worker Ministry. I could always use the phone around dinnertime, the best time to call supporters! Rosie and Verne opened their home and heart to me and my predecessor and followers. Their name, address, and phone number and important details about their participation were recorded on 3-by-5-inch cards that were carefully updated and passed on from one organizer to the next. Rosie and I both considered her my Huelga Mother. The welcome and the warmth and comfort of

Rosie and Verne's home was such a refuge and an important source of support during that period.

Learning to Organize

While I knew Fred Ross, Sr. was a legend, even at the time, I did take for granted the training he conducted for the San Francisco Bay Area boycotters. We learned how to make phone calls ("I will be in your neighborhood, when can I come by?" never "May I come by?"), how to conduct personal visits and how to conduct a house meeting that would result in money, picketers, and more house meetings by delivering the "pitch." We developed our house meeting presentations, learning not to stop for questions "until after "the pitch." (Never let the house meeting host suggest a break to serve snacks midway into the house meeting.) Our house meeting outlines and presentations were practiced in front of our peers, critiqued with the aid of the early video technology that was just becoming available. I remember the peer review when Margo McBane almost strangled me when we climbed into one of the fleet of Plymouth Valiants (the one with the hanger in place of an antennae, but not the one without a door), after the meeting for using "you know" after almost every sentence of my first house meeting. We learned how to keep track of our accomplishments and reported on the results of each day of organizing or picketing at highly structured morning meetings.

Marching to Modesto

I think I was there the day the march to Modesto was conceived. Does anyone else remember another story? The Santa Clara boycott staff was meeting to review the Gallo boycott strategy. Ken Fujimoto was sitting on the floor of the convent made available to the UFW by Sacred Heart Church in San Jose, wearing his uniform of gray cords and zorries. He suddenly suggested we organize a march to Modesto from the S.F. Bay Area. It really isn't very far, he said. I do not remember if or how we convinced others of the idea, but suddenly it had a life of its own. The rest of the story is well documented.

Unfolding the First Activist Ironing Board

I think I was there the day Fred Ross invented the use of ironing boards as a more efficient tool for tabling for signatures. Does anyone else claim to have been there? Maybe I heard this and was not there at all, but here is how I remember it. I was gathering signatures for a petition drive or registering people to vote, in front of some no-name KMart somewhere in the suburbs of Santa Clara County. I had set up a standard card table with two or three people filling out the petition when Fred Sr. showed up. He strode up to me from the parking lot, clearly agitated that I was missing potential signatures because there was no room for more people, and we had no extra clipboards. He went into KMart to buy another card table to two. He came out with a couple of ironing boards, as there were no card tables for sale, and quickly set these up, lining up petitions across the board. We all agreed the ironing tables were much better, as people did not have to stoop over. I have seen ironing boards used by petitioners ever since!

Conclusion

There are so many little stories inside the overarching events of the bookends that marked the beginning and end of my full-time commitment to the UFW, starting with the successful No on 22 campaign and ending with the unsuccessful Yes on 14 campaign. There is so much I learned at an important time in my life—so much I feel so lucky to have been exposed to. There was the day-to-day life in the boycott houses, staying for interim periods in the homes of supporters who were so generous with their homes, food, cars, telephones. There were the weekly events of the work itself, the personal visits, the house meetings, presentations to schools and churches, to organizing the picket lines and support for the lettuce, Safeway, and Gallo wine boycotts. Driving to Yuma, Arizona to stand at the border, calling out in the middle of a very black night to potential strikebreakers ... driving all the next day and night to get back. Meeting with the other Bay Area boycotters at St. Joseph the Worker Church, attending the union conventions in Fresno and being amazed by the murals, inspired by Cesar and the size of the crowd and the potential power of the belief it was possible. Yes, we shouted, it can be done!

I was drawn to the passion and the shared purpose that so pervaded that time —the joy, humor, and optimism concurrent with the seriousness and dedication to social justice.

What an honor it was to serve, and how lucky I was to have been convinced to drive over to San Jose one dark and rainy night!