

## Christine Schenk 1973–1975

### Background and Philadelphia Boycott

From 1973 to 1975 I worked with Ruth Shy and many others in the UFW boycott office on West 23rd Street in Philadelphia.

In many ways, this story started much earlier. I grew up in the rural Ohio town of Lima. As a senior at Lima Central Catholic I was invited to “teach catechism” to migrant worker children in nearby Ada. My friends and I made several visits to this small farming community about 20 miles away. I went mostly because it sounded like fun to spend time with my high-school friends (it wasn’t often that we were let loose in a car to travel out of town!).

But we were shocked into silence when we saw the living conditions the migrant workers had to put up with. Tumbledown shacks with dirt floors, a bare mattress for sleeping, no furniture, no toys for the kids, and little food. The guys in our group spent most of their time tossing a football around with the young men. We girls talked with the migrant moms and played with the children. I don’t know if the kids learned much about their religion. I do know that we learned a lot about poverty, injustice, and the heart-wrenching patience of the very poor.

As a result of this experience, I followed the UFW movement with enthusiasm and interest. I greatly admired Cesar Chavez and was encouraged that something was being done to improve working conditions for those who harvest our food. When the Teamster union signed sweetheart deals with growers to destroy the United Farm Workers union, I was outraged.

In the spring of 1972, I ran into a UFW organizer who was leafleting in front of a northeast Philadelphia supermarket near my home. (I am sorry to say I have forgotten her name.) I had just completed my first year of teaching nursing and was very disillusioned with academia. I was also a newly vowed nun with the Medical Mission sisters and had been deeply changed by that community’s commitment to those made poor. I had learned about systemic change and longed to help bring it about. The thought came that I would really like to help the union in some way if I could. I was 27 years old and ready to find out how to change the world.

### Interfaith Coordinator

After talking it over with Ruth and with my Medical Mission Sister community, I took a full-time position (room and board and \$5 per week) with the UFW. I worked as the “interfaith coordinator” of all the various religious denominations who supported the boycott. I also organized in Germantown, where the union had widespread support.

As soon as I began work at the boycott house, 17 Chicano and Chicana farmworkers arrived in Philadelphia from California. The fields were filling with scabs and Teamsters. Picket lines were increasingly dangerous. A nationwide boycott of grapes and lettuce seemed the only viable way to put pressure on the growers.

I moved to an abandoned Catholic rectory in Germantown, where I lived during the week with Alejandro and Juanita Rodriguez and their darling baby son, Alex. I spent weekends home with the Medical Mission Sisters, which was, I will admit, a welcome respite. The boycott house was noisy and filled with our *cucaracha* friends (inevitable in this old row house), so it was good to get away every now and then!

I spoke in hundreds of churches, synagogues, and Quaker meetings all over Philadelphia and outlying areas. I showed movies (*Si Se Puede!* and *Pastures of Plenty*) and taught classes in many Catholic high schools. I organized dozens of house meetings and spoke to religious communities of women and men. We built the Germantown organization to well over 300 people. Every Saturday morning, these good folks leafleted in supermarkets all over northeast Philadelphia.

A big part of my job was to work with the various religious denominations. I helped organize delegations of ministers and priests to meet with supermarket CEOs. We asked them to take non-UFW grapes and lettuce off the shelves. If they refused, we asked them to at least avoid using them as “loss leaders” in their advertising. This was quite effective, and we did get an occasional agreement to buy only UFW or Jersey lettuce.

It was a wonderful time of learning how to organize and how to endure despite the heavy odds against us. Ruth was the best teacher and boss anyone could have. She was a terrific organizer herself and the California farmworkers loved her. Often one or another of them would go with me to give a firsthand account of conditions in California. Once, Raul (I’m sorry, I can’t remember his last name) spoke at a meeting of the Knights of Columbus. He did a great job and even though this was a pretty conservative crowd, we recruited many supporters that evening.

There is too much to tell in a short essay, so I will relate two memorable anecdotes. One is about Cesar’s visit to Philadelphia, and the other is an amusing incident arising from a picket line organized by a remarkable group of Swarthmore students.

### Cesar in Philadelphia

Cesar came to Philadelphia for about four days in 1974. We had only three weeks’ notice. Two weeks before he came, Ruth told me to organize an interfaith breakfast for 200 people. I had to find the place, the food, and volunteers to cook and serve. And I had to get invitations out ... either by telephone or mail. The clincher was that it all had to be donated, since of course, we had no money. I thought Ruth was nuts. It seemed an

impossible task even if we had had enough time. She gave me four names and some advice about who else to contact. I went to work. Sure enough, one group donated eggs, someone else coffee, another juice, another bread and jelly. And so it went. In no time we had the breakfast all set up. We also asked for donations from all the denominations that sent representatives. And they graciously contributed. It seemed a miracle to me at the time ... and it still does. I learned to never underestimate the goodness of people, and how it really is possible to create something out of nothing.

Several other memories of Cesar's visit remain vivid. The first is how beloved he was by his brother farmworkers. When he came to the boycott house he asked if they had any shoes, since his own had holes in them. We were blessed with lots of men's shoes, and sure enough, Raul and Freddie found him a pair in just the right size. Cesar promptly put them on and discarded the old pair. It seems a small thing, but it was Cesar's way of letting the workers know he was one of them. They in turn were pleased to have something to give him.

After Cesar got his new shoes, we had a home liturgy with Augustinian Father Jim Ryan presiding. Ryan was a great friend. We could always count on him to help out. He taught history and labor relations at Villanova and was an important player in our group of interdenominational leaders. Later, he would work for the union, too.

The front room of the boycott house, normally so full of noise and clamor, became exceedingly quiet as Jim made ready for the liturgy. Cesar was vehement about taking phones off their hooks and stopping any other activity in that living room while we shared Eucharist. For him, everything came to a halt for God because at that moment, nothing else mattered. It was a strong witness to all of us about who *really* was in charge. And it wasn't Cesar.

And then there is the trip back from Pottstown. This was the last of Cesar's speaking engagements. When it was over, Ruth asked me to drive him back to Philadelphia. He got in the back seat of our decrepit 1964 red Dodge Dart which (miraculously) still ran quite well, even though the gas pedal occasionally fell off. Ruth told me that he had to be at the airport at a certain time and that we should under no circumstances stop anywhere along the way.

Cesar, however, had other plans. He begged me (literally) to speed up and pass the rest of the caravan. Which I did. We sped along a little back road, which passed a lovely garden center. Cesar pleaded with me to stop so he could take a look at the flowers, which were quite beautiful. I didn't have the heart to say no, so I pulled over. He jumped out and immersed himself in a riot of colorful blossoms. It was an all too brief respite from a rigorous four-day marathon of media and meetings. Ruth soon caught up with us. She scolded Cesar severely (if somewhat humorously), and we continued on our way. I grew to love the man that day and never regretted helping him play hooky.

## Swarthmore Saga: the Case of the Noisy Air Conditioner

My other anecdote has to do with a picket line incident at the highest volume A&P store in lower Merion Township. This store was faithfully picketed every Saturday by students from nearby Swarthmore College. One Saturday morning they organized an especially large demonstration. We walked up and down outside the store singing union songs, distributing leaflets, and conversing with customers, who were cheerful and quite open to our message. At no time did we ever block entry or engage in rude behavior.

A police officer came up and told us we had to stop, since he said there were customers complaining about the noise. I expressed my surprise and politely displayed our labor union and legal information explaining our right to picket. He went away for a while but returned to tell me that if we didn't stop singing he would have to give us a citation. Being pretty inexperienced with legal jargon (and pretty inexperienced, period), I asked him what a citation was. Whereupon he gave me one. This didn't stop our picketing, but it did put a damper on things, to say the least.

As it turned out I had not been cited for disturbing the peace as one would expect, but under an ordinance governing noise levels on air conditioners. We later found out this insured that the \$100 fine would go into township coffers and not to the county where "disturbing the peace" fines went. The ordinance even mandated that a special machine had to be used to test the decibel level of the air conditioner before any citation could be given. Needless to say, no such machine ever made an appearance. And neither, by the way, did any air conditioners.

This ridiculous injustice so outraged our Swarthmore students that they went to the press. A small news brief appeared in *The New York Times* with the caption: "Nun Cited for Being a Noisy Air Conditioner." It was pretty funny and very pathetic.

My Medical Mission community was determined to fight this, since they saw it as a grievous injustice and didn't want it on my record if and when I chose to work outside the country. They hired an attorney to appeal. This process would prove to be far lengthier than we ever imagined at the time.

As events unfolded, we found that the complaint about the noise did not come from any A&P customer as the police implied, but from a businessman in an office building up the street. He said he couldn't work because of the noise and called the police. Being a firm believer in nonviolence and trying to negotiate with one's opponent, I went to visit him. The first thing I noticed was that his office was on the other side of a four-lane street and over a block up the road from the A&P entrance. The entrance itself was far back from the main road because of the large parking lot in front of the store. Curious.

As I sat in his office, I also noticed that every window was sealed shut, as were all the

others in the building. When I pointed this out, wondering politely how he could have possibly heard us from so far away, the man stubbornly stuck to his story. I knew I wouldn't get anywhere and left after trying to explain about working conditions for farmworkers and why we were doing what we were doing. As I exited, I noticed that rail tracks for SEPTA, the Philadelphia public transit system, were only 200 yards from the back of the office building. In short, there was no way this man could have heard our singing from behind sealed windows, over the din of a busy four-lane road and the racket of a nearby overground railway. He was clearly in cahoots with the A&P owners.

I was eventually vindicated, but not until the case went all the way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. By this time, I was in Appalachia studying to be a nurse practitioner. But Father Jim Ryan went to the hearing and told me all about it. After the Lower Merion attorney completed his presentation, there was a moment of surprised silence as the panel of judges took it all in. One judge then quietly asked the attorney if he honestly thought he had a case. As he sputtered around trying to come up with an answer, another judge interrupted him. "Counsel," she asked, rolling her eyes, "was the lady carrying an air conditioner?" With that, soft chuckles erupted all over the courtroom. It was finally over. The judges found in our favor, I was cleared of all noisy air conditioner charges, and all was well with the world.

#### Past Is Prologue

My years working with Ruth Shy and the union provided me with organizing skills I would put to good use in the future. I eventually worked in Appalachia as a family nurse practitioner and a nurse midwife. While there, I organized a coalition to change the nurse practice act so we could continue to bring medicine as well as health care to medically underserved mountain people. When I moved to Cleveland, I organized a public sanctuary for political refugees in danger of losing their lives because of unjust U.S. policy in Central America. I also helped form a statewide coalition to expand Medicaid for low-income pregnant women and their children. After a five-year struggle, we succeeded, and the program "Healthy Start" continues to provide much-needed health services to poor families.

My present work at FutureChurch involves organizing a nationwide grassroots movement to prepare the way for married priests and full equality for women in Catholicism. Just last summer, we organized more than 300 celebrations of St. Mary of Magdala all over the U.S. and around the world. We have been working for over six years to reverse the mistaken notion that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute. We help people understand her important role as the first witness to the Resurrection and the "Apostle to the Apostles." Our campaign has led to hundreds of newspaper stories and culminated in articles in both *Time* and *Newsweek* this past year. The 10-page cover story in the December 8, 2003 issue of *Newsweek* quoted five women, including me, who organized celebrations in their cities. This is one small but important step as Catholics retrieve the crucial historical memory that we did have women leaders in the earliest Church.

I have organized many campaigns in the past 30 years. But never would I have been able to right the wrongs that so plagued my soul without the formative learning that came from the UFW. Cesar, Ruth, and all the good people I worked with gave me skills. But even more important, they showed me that I really could change the world with a bit of luck and lots of patient endurance. While I have helped change my own small part of the world, I suspect I'm only one of hundreds of former UFW organizers who have done so.

It is often said that one good deed leads to another. Perhaps never more so than the shining witness the UFW movement gave to young people of the 1960s and 1970s. I am blessed to be one of them.