

## Cathy Christian 1973–1977

It was 1973. I was 22 years old and I had just graduated from Berkeley. I thought of myself as a scholar, an antiwar activist, and an organizer. Living in Berkeley, the Central Valley of California seemed very distant and unrelated to the “important” issues I tackled every day. I didn’t know what I would do next, but while I pondered my fate, I whiled away my time and paid the rent working at a local record store. In the middle of all this, a life-changing event occurred in my young life: my heart was broken. Days seemed to drift into each other, and I spent a lot of time feeling sad, but as spring wore on, the headlines about striking farmworkers became more prominent, catching even my listless eyes.

You couldn’t live in Berkeley in 1973 and not know someone who had decided to help the “the union,” and I knew several, almost all attorneys. One of them was Barry Winograd, who has remained a lifelong friend. My guess is he couldn’t stand to watch me moping around anymore, and in the early summer of 1973, he asked if I wanted to tag along while he went to the little valley town of Ripon. Ripon is the headquarters of the Franzia Winery, where Barry was providing legal assistance to the UFW field office. Along with tens of thousands of other UFW members who had won a contract with their employers only three years earlier, the workers at Franzia had gone on strike that summer, protesting the winery’s sweetheart labor contract with the Teamsters union. Although the newspapers had all covered the dramatic strike activity in places like Delano, I had never heard of Ripon. I agreed to go, expecting that I would find a dispirited picket line and some pacifist clergy. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

My first day in Ripon began in the early dawn, not a time when I was usually up and about, when the strikers formed picket lines under their elected ranch committee leaders. The pickets were boisterous and enthusiastic and made life miserable for the *esquiroles* (strikebreakers) who had replaced them in the fields. I became more and more intrigued with the force behind *La Causa*, the name that encompasses everything the UFW symbolized. The UFW field office was staffed by a brother and sister, Ruben and Maria Elena Serna. (I later met their brother Joe when he became mayor of Sacramento, where I have lived since 1981.) These two were smart, multilingual, and savvy union organizers. I couldn’t believe my eyes and ears: this movement wasn’t abstract or fought in support of people in distant lands, this movement was made of real-life mothers and fathers who were putting everything on the line for their union and a better life. I was amazed that it had all been happening right beneath my nose.

After a few days in Ripon, Barry and I went to Livingston to visit Barbara Rhine and Peter Haberfeld, friends from Berkeley who were providing legal assistance to the strikers at Gallo. I went with Barry, expecting to stay a few more days. Instead, I became a full-time volunteer organizer for the UFW. I met people in the UFW field office who provided the logistical support for the strikers who became my friends for life: Aggie Rose, who ran the Livingston operation; Pam Whalen and her brother, Mark; Juan Perez; and Bobby de la

Cruz are just a few. I couldn't get enough of it. Everyone was working day and night to keep the strike alive.

I especially watched and learned from Aggie. Aggie grew up in the Portuguese community in Turlock and she had an amazing ability to hold together a diverse group of Gallo strikers—families from Mexico who worked seasonally at Gallo, and Portuguese “steadies” who worked year-round on the ranch. I was overwhelmed that the strikers at Gallo embraced volunteers like me who came from all over the country and who struggled to learn Spanish and also to learn the organizing discipline and hard work that made the UFW successful. I remember my first *barbacoa*, an event hosted by the strikers to thank all their supporters. The strikers insisted that the volunteers go to the head of the food line, which featured *birria*, or barbecued goat. The smell was mouthwatering, and as I held my plate out, the farmworker woman who was serving reached her large spoon deep into the goat's skull and scooped out a large serving of brains. I knew I was being honored with the best portion, and I knew I had a lot to learn.

I spent the rest of the summer on the picket lines at Gallo. The financial sacrifice made by these workers and their families was enormous, but as the harvest was ending, Gallo had still refused to repudiate its sweetheart deal with the Teamsters. By the fall, the UFW decided to take their organizers and strikers on a national boycott campaign. It was a decisive moment for me, because a major commitment was necessary if I wanted to continue working with the union. I decided to stay with the union.

I spent several more years with the UFW—working on boycott activities in the Bay Area, running a “service center” in Livingston during the 1975 election campaign at Gallo, and ultimately taking responsibility for service centers at half the UFW field offices in California. I went to law school, quit to go back to the union, and then went back to law school again, this time working as an intern in the UFW legal offices in Coachella and Salinas during the organizing drives in 1977. As time went on, and the forces arrayed against it remained implacable and powerful, the UFW seemed to turn inward and away from the organizing battles of the past, both in the fields and with the public on the boycott. I also moved on, but for many years chose jobs that kept me close to the farmworker movement. Beginning in 1978, I worked in Oxnard as an attorney with a legal services program that assisted farmworkers. Almost immediately, I found myself representing more than 100 farmworker families who had been served with eviction notices from their grower-owned housing after the workers had voted to be represented by the UFW. In 1981, I became an appellate attorney for the ALRB and continued that for the next six years.

I know there are those who continue to analyze the mistakes and the successes of the UFW. After all, the lives of farmworkers in California and in other states continue to be mired in poverty and dangerous working conditions, and each of us who have been a part of the UFW has his or her own perspective of those years. I am convinced, however, that virtually every improvement that has been made to farmworkers' lives is directly traceable

to the existence of the UFW and the courage and determination of its leaders. And for me, the UFW will always be “the union.”