

## Stephanie Blondis Bower 1973–1984

### Essay On Work with UFW, AFL-CIO in Washington, D.C.

It was less than a year after moving to Washington, D.C., that I met Gilbert Padilla and the farmworker families who had moved to the East Coast to promote the boycott of grapes and lettuce. We had moved to D.C. from Michigan, where I had visited migrant farmworker camps and picketed outside grocery stores. Having had the Michigan experience, I decided to take up the cause again in support of the UFW's boycotts.

For the next several years, my job would be to promote the UFW and its boycott through fundraising and education in churches and synagogues in the D.C. area. Some churches would allow us to speak at the service—and even take up collections. In most, we would show a video after the service. Some churches would not allow anything at all—such as in Frank Fitzsimmons's parish (he was president of the Teamsters union). We were in an organizing conflict with the Teamsters and he was a major contributor to the church! The Unitarian churches were always very supportive.

The highlight of getting to know the church community was a mass celebrated by labor's priest, Monsignor George Higgins, and Bishop Eugene Marino, with Cesar Chavez in attendance. The event was held at the home of Sargent and Eunice Shriver. Hundreds came and prayed and ate! The meat was cooked outdoors in pits for a day—the way that the farmworkers cook in the fields. Side dishes were made from the wonderful farmworker recipes that we all enjoyed during those years. The children played and swam in the pool. My six children have not forgotten this experience.

Years ago, while I was in Catholic school, speaking with the clergy made me nervous. During my time working with the UFW, priests would tell me how their anxiety levels would rise when they were told that I was waiting on the other end of the phone. What will she ask of us now?

During these years, we picketed, leafleted, and met at the home of the consumer advocate for Giant foods, our local supermarket chain. Her name was Esther Peterson. When Jimmy Carter became president, Esther was named consumer advocate for the entire United States.

Fred Ross came to Washington to train our staff in organizing techniques such as house meetings. We had an exciting staff in those days, including two young German men. They were sent to the U.S. to work with the UFW by an organization in Germany. The organization's name translated as "Action Reconciliation," and it sought to rectify the damage that Germany had done during World War II. I am still in touch with one of these young men, Gerry Mechnich.

By 1976 the UFW leadership, along with the farmworker families, had returned to California. On July 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, I had another once-in-a-lifetime experience—standing on the stage at the National Mall with Dolores Huerta to celebrate the bicentennial of the United States.

In December of 1976, we began organizing support for the movie premiere of “Bound for Glory.” This movie depicted the life of Woody Guthrie. The premiere was held in February of 1977 at a theater in Washington. President Jimmy Carter was in the White House then, and our spirits were high. This event was financially successful and raised the visibility of the UFW. The movie’s star, David Carradine, was in attendance, as was Arlo Guthrie, Margery Guthrie (Woody’s widow), President Carter’s son, Chip, labor’s troubadour Joe Glazer, and Cesar Chavez. The theater was filled to capacity with labor leaders and supporters of the United Farm Workers from all walks of life.

Now I would like to write about the late 1970s—the Carter years. I became the membership coordinator for the National Association of Farmworker Organizations (NAFO). The Carter Administration was giving federal grants to farmworker organizations for their projects all over the country. The UFW decided to join NAFO. One of the lasting outcomes of its membership is a farmworker-owned radio station in California.

In the early 1980s, I became a registered lobbyist for the UFW. I had an office in the AFL-CIO headquarters building on 16<sup>th</sup> Street across from the White House. Every Monday morning I met with all of the unions’ legislative representatives. I worked very closely with Dolores Huerta and Cesar’s son, Paul Chavez. The most challenging legislation was the Simpson-Mazzoli Immigration Bill. The growers’ lobby was pushing for a guest worker program with no penalties for employers who violated workers’ rights. Besides testifying on different aspects of the proposed immigration legislation, I also testified on pesticide legislation and how it would affect farmworkers.

During these years my responsibilities also included meeting with government departments on regulations such as with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). I met several times with a woman from the EPA who was doing research in California on pesticides. She was very much committed to the farmworker cause and seemed worried about retaliation from the opposition as she became more aware of existing conditions in farmworker communities. This experience of educating and advocating on behalf of the workers was very fulfilling for me.

The last big event that we had in the Washington area that involved UFW supporters was when President Bill Clinton awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Cesar Chavez posthumously. Helen Chavez accepted this award. Following the presentation, a large group gathered at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies. Besides many Chavez family members, the event brought together many of the local people who had been very active throughout those boycotting years!

I think what has always attracted me to the United Farm Workers was Cesar's belief in nonviolence. Deep in my heart, I have always believed in it. For many of us, our association with Cesar and the UFW persuaded us that nonviolence does work.