

Terry (Vasquez) Scott 1973–1988

Sometimes life takes you on unexpected turns. Given my upbringing in a white, middle-class, decidedly non-union Southern California beach town, the normal expectation was that I would go to college and settle down into an affluent life filled with a good job and a loving family. To end up working for the farmworkers' union and choosing a life of voluntary poverty was, to say the very least, quite a departure from the norm.

Background

For much of my early life, I felt that I'd been born about 10 years too late. I came of age during the tail end of the turbulent times that were the 1960s, and I was anxious to soak up as much of the world as I could. My favorite stories as a kid involved people and experiences far from my own. I'd read about the folksingers hanging out in Greenwich Village, which at the time I naively pronounced "Greenwitch" Village, because I'd only seen it written and had never heard the name spoken before. I was totally captivated by the music and the idea that it could be a powerful force for bringing about positive change in the world. I listened to the songs of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, and checked out old Woody Guthrie albums from the library.

The war in Vietnam was raging, but I knew no one personally who had gone to war. My little beach town was filled with hippies hanging out by the pier, but it was not an overtly political crowd. If anything, there were more "Jesus freaks" and "stoners" than activists. Yet, in May of 1970, when four students were gunned down while protesting the war at Kent State, I wore a black armband to school and was part of a small group of students who led the school in a walkout. I was 13 years old, and president of my 8th grade class.

By the time I got to high school, I was beginning to see myself more as an activist. I scoured the newspapers for news of what was going on in the world. I read about nonviolence and the people who were refusing to pay war taxes. I read Thoreau's *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. I considered myself a feminist and was outspoken on environmental issues. As the bombs continued to fall on Vietnam, and Watergate unfolded at home, I went door to door campaigning for George McGovern. I was an absolute idealist and held tight to the belief that if enough of us spoke up, we could change the world.

My first exposure to Cesar Chavez came during the fall of 1972. A group of friends and I ditched school to attend a McGovern rally at UCLA. Cesar was there to talk about the farmworkers' situation and their fight against Proposition 22. (Proposition 22 was an initiative on the ballot that would have stopped the farmworkers' right to boycott, conduct strikes at harvest time, and to vote in secret-ballot union elections at their ranches.) At the time, I was impressed with Cesar, but didn't get actively involved with the movement.

Still, that prior exposure was enough to pique my interest the following spring when I saw a notice posted at my high school that someone from the UFW was going to talk after school. When I got to the classroom where the meeting was to take place, I found a handful of students eagerly listening to a young passionate Chicana from East Los Angeles named Irma Escamilla. Irma had been assigned to organize support for the Safeway boycott in the South Bay, and she was looking for volunteers to help her distribute leaflets at the grocery stores. I gladly signed up to leaflet for a couple of hours the following Saturday afternoon. Thus began my introduction to the union and my hands-on education in organizing.

Taking the First Baby Steps: My Education As an Organizer Begins

At first I was a bit shy and merely shadowed Irma while she talked with customers about the boycott. During slow periods when there weren't many shoppers, she patiently answered my many questions about the farmworkers' lives and about the union. She told me personal stories about the strikers and began to educate me about the history of the labor movement in this country. As I learned more and gained confidence, I began to approach people on my own. Soon I found myself spending every Saturday on the Safeway parking lot asking people to support the boycott. It was an eye-opening experience.

One of the first things I learned was that you can't pre-judge how someone will react. Being young and liberal, I initially expected that I'd get a good response whenever I approached a young person with long hair. To my dismay, I found that many couldn't be bothered with taking the trouble to turn around and go shop at another store. A typically negative and rude response was, "Are you a farmworker? What do you know about it anyway?" On the other hand, I was often surprised when someone whom I'd judged to be a conservative "redneck" would respond enthusiastically and positively—often detailing their own labor union affiliation and affirming that they'd "never cross a picket line."

Huelga! The Coachella Grape Strike

It was a very momentous time to get involved with the union. In mid-April of that year, the grape growers signed "sweetheart contracts" with the Teamsters union. The following week, Irma invited me to go with her to Coachella to join the strikers on the picket line. I excitedly piled into Irma's very crowded and very beat-up old car at dawn, and headed south to the strike. It was like stepping into another world!

We arrived to a scene of thousands of farmworkers strung out along the roads lining the grape fields. The workers' spirits were incredibly high; they proudly waved their homemade union flags and sang songs in both Spanish and English to keep up their courage. Across the road, on the shoulder next to the vineyards, stood a loosely spread-out line of Teamster "goons." They were mostly very white and very large, and they looked like members of an outlaw motorcycle club. We were told that they were being paid \$65 per day to try to intimidate the strikers. (This was a huge amount in those days—the minimum wage was

only \$1.65 per hour.) Also milling about the scene were several sheriff's deputies. You could feel the tension in the air. It was a classic David and Goliath moment if ever there was one. I was completely enthralled.

Later that afternoon, exhausted but in good spirits, we all headed over to the park for a huge rally. We slowly made our way through the food line to get a plate of beans, rice, and tortillas that had been prepared by the folks working the strike kitchen. We gratefully collapsed under the shade of the trees to eat, while a lively mariachi band played on the stage. Then Cesar was introduced and you could feel the immense love and respect that the workers had for him. We all crowded closer to the stage to hear him talk. He gave a moving and impassioned speech about the strike, and the ultimate rightness of having the courage to stand up for yourself. I stood there in that sea of brown faces and knew that I was hooked. It was exactly one month before my 17th birthday.

The Summer of 1973

As it turned out, by the time summer rolled around, I'd talked my mom into letting me spend my summer vacation working on the boycott full time. (It helped immensely that my good friend Sara also decided to join staff for the summer.) We were to be paid \$5 per week, plus room and board. We were assigned to live at Friendship House, a sprawling old two-story stucco house located on East 28th Street, a little bit south of downtown Los Angeles. I again felt like I'd stepped onto a different planet.

The neighborhood surrounding Friendship House was poor and urban, with almost no trees in sight. The wide cement streets were cracked and lined with older homes that had seen better days. Gang graffiti was rampant. My housemates were mostly white, an unusual sight in this predominantly black neighborhood. The loud and rhythmic thumping of police helicopters circling overhead and searchlights sweeping the neighborhood was an every-night occurrence. We were cautioned by "seasoned" boycott staff not to venture out alone after dark.

The people working on the boycott came from diverse backgrounds, which, with my desire to fully experience the world, I saw as a big plus. Those living at Friendship House were an eclectic bunch and included college students taking time off from school to work with the union; a middle-aged ex-priest who had spent several years in Guatemala and had previously worked with citrus workers in Florida; a young German man named Franz who was doing a year of service with the UFW as a nonviolent alternative to mandatory military service in Germany; a young Migrant Ministry volunteer from Colorado who had gotten involved with the UFW through his church youth group; a woman in her mid-20s who had done labor union organizing on the East Coast; and a young Quaker who had first been exposed to the boycott when he participated in a Quaker Work Camp. We were a somewhat motley crew with varying degrees of world experience but tons of enthusiasm and energy. (Friendship House was just one of several boycott houses located throughout the L.A. area, but most of the people working on staff that summer were "volunteers")

because the farmworkers were still actively on strike and picketing the fields in the San Joaquin Valley.)

Although the house was large, living conditions were very crowded. I shared an upstairs room with my friend Sara and one other young woman. We slept in sleeping bags on top of bare mattresses thrown on the wood floor, and there was only one dresser, so we mostly kept our clothes in backpacks or duffel bags. Brightly colored posters were taped to the walls throughout the house. There was a large old-fashioned kitchen downstairs, along with a big living room strewn with sagging sofas and a scratchy record player that was constantly playing.

We rotated cooking and house cleaning duties among all household members. This provided a good opportunity for developing community as well as a constant source of frustration and bickering when people didn't do their share. We had weekly "house meetings" to sort out these issues and plan for daily living needs. It was a constant challenge to find a moment when the single bathroom was free, and if you were lucky enough to find it empty, chances were there'd be no hot water left to take a shower.

We lived off donated food and clothing, and being personally flexible was a *huge* benefit because plans changed frequently—most of us learned to "go with the flow." (I can remember being so *sick* of eating frozen bean burritos that summer—someone had donated an entire truckload to the L.A. boycott and we had them every single day for lunch—that I swore I'd never eat them again in my life!) We got around L.A. in a variety of old, run-down union cars—mostly early 60s Plymouth Valiants and Dodge Darts plastered with boycott bumper stickers.

We worked six days a week, but we also hung out together when we had time off. What I remember most about that summer is how much fun it was. Despite the long hours, we had a great time together. We were part of something authentic and real and bigger than ourselves, and it created a bond and a sense of belonging. There were always a few people lounging around in the living room, talking or making music into the early morning hours. The house also had a fairly constant flow of visitors dropping by to stay for a few days, and share stories of their travels.

Pounding the Pavement

Unlike later grass roots-style organizing that I did with the union, most of my work during the summer of 1973 involved being out on the streets, pounding the pavement to spread the word about the boycott. I was assigned to the crew that worked the San Fernando Valley. Our days started early and we usually didn't get back to the boycott house until nearly dusk. We went door to door talking to people; we distributed leaflets on college campuses and at busy intersections in downtown L.A.; we did "human billboarding" during rush hour traffic; we did letter-writing campaigns until our hands were so cramped we could hardly grasp a pen; and we spent lots of time picketing Safeway. On Saturdays,

busloads of strikers would come to town to help picket the stores, and this connection with the workers was tremendously important for those of us staffing the boycott. It kept us fired up to fight the good fight.

As the summer progressed, I got a bit tougher. I learned how to confidently speak up as a picket captain—talking to the police and insisting on our right to picket when the Safeway managers threatened us and tried to intimidate us. I also got used to people on store rooftops constantly taking our photographs.

We had weekly citywide staff meetings to get updates on the strike and boycott efforts around the country. The jails in the San Joaquin Valley were filled to capacity with strikers and church supporters, and there was increasing violence directed at the strikers. In August, we got word that two farmworkers had been killed. Cesar called an immediate halt to the picketing in the fields because of the escalating violence and asked all of us to join him in a three-day “water only” fast. (I had never fasted before, and I can remember feeling light-headed while doing door-to-door leafleting in 100 degree heat in the San Fernando Valley.)

Throughout the summer, I also felt a sense of culture shock when I occasionally went back home on a day off. I was experiencing so much rapid growth, and it came as a shock to suddenly be back with my old friends who were doing the same old things: getting high and hanging out. I had long talks with my boyfriend, who was a year older than I and heading off to college in the fall. He couldn’t understand why I was choosing to spend our last potential summer together away from him.

Ultimately, I had to face the big disappointment of leaving the union at the end of the summer in order to finish my last semester of high school. It was a tremendous letdown and seemed to me a pointless waste of my energies and talents.

A Return to the Union

The summer of 1973 made such a big impression on me that after I finished high school, I decided to delay going to college in order to devote a full year to working for the union. (At the time, I figured it was either the UFW or head to Europe for an extended backpacking trip to explore the world; somehow the union won out.)

My years of working with the UFW definitely shaped who I’ve become. There was a tremendous sense of freedom and a feeling of empowerment that came despite the fact that as a volunteer, I was essentially surrendering my own specific choices about what work I did. There was a definite unwritten code within the union that placed great value on the simple idea of just showing up and doing what was needed/asked of you. Our role was to be there in service to the farmworkers. Within that framework, we had the opportunity to be creative and to learn to fly by the seat of our pants when necessary. All in all, it was a

grand adventure, and I was given a great deal of responsibility— along with the opportunity to learn and make mistakes—for someone so young.

I had a lot of scary and comical experiences on the picket line. I can remember being hosed down by an angry liquor-store owner on Venice Boulevard during the Gallo wine boycott in 1975, being verbally harassed (and having bottles of wine thrown our way) by the Teamster truck drivers who delivered Gallo to the liquor stores we were picketing, and being on a picket line one time with a middle-age Catholic mom, her 10-year-old son, and a feisty 91-year-old Jewish woman just before we were all chased down the street by a numchuck-wielding Korean immigrant storeowner in Venice, who felt threatened when we asked people to boycott his postage stamp-sized liquor store (and hiding behind a telephone pole while he took out his frustrations on a nearby mailbox). On a different occasion, we rushed headlong into the back storage cooler of a Boys grocery store to try and find one of our staff members—Pete Savino— who had been dragged inside by an irate security guard while we were conducting a 24-hour vigil/picket line at the store. (Pete, who, by the way looked a lot like Louis XIV with long brown curly hair and an aristocratic nose, had a fabulous knack for pissing off store managers without even doing anything.) Despite how some of these stories sound, I don't remember feeling like I was being reckless. We recognized that controversy came with the territory, and we were watchful for indications that things were getting out of hand.

I later had the opportunity of working directly with Cesar when I moved to La Paz and was assigned to work on his personal staff for a year—which was a tremendous education in and of itself. I started out feeling very uncertain in my understanding of what he wanted (and was to a large degree in awe of him), but after several months, I had developed to the point where I felt completely in tune as far as understanding his style of management. As a manager, Cesar was extremely “hands on” and wanted to know a great deal of specific information— some would say too much detailed information— regarding the work that was being done in each department of the union. My job, as one of four or five people on his personal staff, was to sit in on all of his meetings with the union department heads and then do ongoing follow-up with them so that I could relay back to Cesar how the work was progressing.

Drop Everything!

One thing about the work with the union was that there was always a crisis to respond to somewhere. We got shifted around to fill in wherever the priority needs were, and while this made for a lot of variety and excitement, it also made it hard to make headway in some of the more routine assignments. We were often pulled away from our normal jobs to head out to do campaign work.

In 1976, most of us were sent back out to the cities to work on California State Proposition 14. (This was a UFW-sponsored initiative that would have protected the state's landmark 1975 farm labor law from being weakened by agribusiness.) This was probably the most

physically demanding campaign I ever worked on. I worked with Marshall Ganz in the state campaign headquarters in L.A., and toward the end of the campaign, I remember being absolutely loopy from going 30 days straight with no days off—and an average of one to two hours sleep per night on the hard wooden floor of a large dormitory room in South Los Angeles with about 50 other people sleeping, snoring, and making sounds nearby. Somehow we managed to collect more than 400,000 signatures from registered voters during that 30-day period in order to get Proposition 14 put on the California ballot.

One of my funnier memories from that campaign happened one night about 3 a.m. in the state office. It was toward the end of the campaign, and a group of us found ourselves with a single bottle of wine and no corkscrew anywhere. We were determined to get that bottle of wine open! Finally, Marshall remembered a friend in Santa Barbara who he said could probably help. He called this guy up and woke him from a sound sleep—I don't even remember now who it was—but we all huddled around the speaker phone to hear his instructions for opening it by turning the bottle upside down at a 45 degree angle and gently tapping the base of the bottle with the heel of a shoe until the cork gradually worked its way out.

Personal Milestones

Working with the union was so much more than simply a job; it was a lifestyle that was all-encompassing. I have many fond memories of personal milestones that are so entwined with the UFW. I celebrated my 21st birthday in San Francisco's Chinatown with Cesar and seven or eight other UFW friends. I got married later that year at La Paz to a former field worker, with 300 people in attendance, and an incredible party afterwards—complete with a sit-down dinner and dance with a live band.

Most of my memories from that period are happy, but there were also sad times. My husband, Elizer, and I were both buoyed by the loving community at La Paz as we dealt with our grief over the death of our newborn daughter.

Spreading My Wings

After a year of working on Cesar's staff, I was promoted to the department head level and suddenly found myself managing a staff of 25 people when I was made executive director of the National Farm Workers Service Center. Because everyone in the department spoke Spanish, and there were a few who didn't know English, I can still remember my sense of accomplishment at taking my first tentative steps toward conducting staff meetings entirely in Spanish. Thankfully, the workers had a sense of humor and were very supportive whenever I made mistakes.

It was around this time that I also got over my fear of singing in public, and for the first time, I began to play guitar and lead the singing at the La Paz community meetings and church services.

Join the Union: See the Country!

In the early fall of 1979, we were sent back out on the boycott. Over the course of the next year or so, Elizer and I lived in Seattle, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Detroit. Everywhere we went, people opened their hearts and homes to us. The strategy on this boycott was to meet with the leaders of as many organizations (labor, religious, community, and school groups) as we could. We asked for their help in publicizing the boycott and also in pressuring the local supermarket chains to stop carrying the Red Coach brand of lettuce, which was the target of our boycott because of Bruce Church's unfair labor practices. (Bruce Church was the third-largest lettuce grower in the world.)

For both of us, we were literally seeing the country for the first time. We packed all our worldly belongings into the back of a cherry-red 1964 Chevy Nova station wagon that we'd bought for \$400. Elizer had a knack for working on cars and kept it running smoothly through a lot of hard miles. On the trip heading east, we spent an uncomfortable night freezing and trying to catch a little bit of sleep on a hard wooden bench in a small mission-style church somewhere along Interstate 40 in New Mexico in November (with no heat inside and snow on the ground outside). While we were in St. Louis, I had my first experience flying in a small plane when one of the supporters offered to fly me up to Madison, Wisconsin, to check out the stores there. I can still remember the excitement of seeing a new dusting of snow covering the ground and how flat everything looked from the air. I also remember my first glimpse of Canadian geese flying south in "V" formation while we drove west from Detroit to meet with supporters in Lansing.

In each city, we worked our butts off, and because of the tremendous response to the boycott, we were successful in getting the major chain stores to stop carrying the Red Coach label lettuce.

Family Life

We returned to California in December of 1980, just in time to welcome the birth of our oldest son, Raul. In the late spring of 1981, we moved to Elizer's hometown of Earlimart, a very small and dusty farmworker town just north of Delano. I stayed home full time taking care of Raul, and Elizer worked in the fields.

One memorable experience was of trying to peacefully contain our next door neighbor, who was from a small mountain village in Mexico. She kept trying to have her teenage son shoot and kill a magnificent white-faced barn owl who liked to roost in our backyard tree—all because she was convinced that the owl was really a *bruja* who was coming after her husband.

We eventually moved back to La Paz in early 1983 when I was pregnant with our second son, Chris.

Time To Move On

As time wore on, the life in the union began to lose some of its appeal for me. I felt torn after we had the kids—my identity in the union was so wrapped up in my work, and there was definite pressure for everyone to work. I had absolutely *loved* being an organizer, but I also felt a deep need to be first and foremost a “Mom” after having children. Despite a lot of lip service paid to the importance of family, there was a lack of actual support for families in the union. Husbands and fathers were often sent off to work on campaigns and ended up being away from their families for long periods of time. If both parents were working out of the same office, there was still the difficulty of juggling family and work.

Elizer and I eventually divorced after 10 years together. We both continued to work for the union, but especially as a single mom, I found myself less and less willing to work six days a week and have my kids in childcare that long. As Raul and Chris entered elementary school, I wanted them to be able to play soccer and T-ball on Saturday mornings and not have our only “downtime” being taken up with laundry, grocery shopping, or some other household chore. I gradually made the decision to move on and left the union at 32. (My year off from college had somehow stretched into 14!)

I have bittersweet memories of being at the Forty Acres in Delano on the day Cesar broke his last fast in August of 1988. That day was, coincidentally, also my last day of work with the union. In 1993, I returned to Delano with my children and my new husband to march to the Forty Acres one last time for Cesar’s funeral.

Lasting Impressions

There are so many things that are still with me today from my time in the union. I constantly use recipes that I first learned from the farmworker women. I look back with warmth and can clearly recall that feeling of being in the absolute right place at the right time. I have some amazing friends from those days that I still keep in touch with. I’ve never since encountered such a remarkable and dedicated group of people.

I hope I’ve retained the flexibility that I developed in the union. I do tend to feel comfortable in all kinds of situations—urban, rural, other cultures—and I occasionally smile to myself when I surprise someone by speaking Spanish fluently. I’m glad that I had the experience of getting by on very little, although I never felt “poor” when I was in the union. In some ways, the lack of materialism was such a relief because it allowed you to relax and focus your energy on more important things—living your life, rather than amassing more “stuff.” When I’m juggling current bills, I sometimes long for those simpler days.

I also still feel a strong sense of the inner resourcefulness that comes with knowing that you can accomplish the “impossible” if you work hard at it. I’m thankful that I had the

chance to play a vital role in something bigger than myself and be a part of history. And while I'm not quite the absolute idealist that I was at 17, I still believe in fighting the good fight and also in the power of music. These days you could say I've come full circle: I'm back living in a California beach town and still enthralled with the power of music, although now, as a singer-songwriter, I raise my voice primarily through my songs. And I'm still waiting to take that trip around the world ...