

Chris A. Schneider 1973–1989

The priest stood in front of Father David Lawler's sixth-grade catechism class at St. Joan of Arc Catholic School in Indianapolis. The year was 1968. With the rest of my classmates, I listened as he told us about farmworkers he worked with way out in California. He said it was in some small town named Delano. He asked us to ask our moms and dads to boycott grapes. His name, or exactly what he said, I can't recall, but it had quite an impact. That afternoon I told my mom we shouldn't buy grapes. The reasons I gave to her probably were not that articulate. Saying the boycott had Fr. Lawler's blessing was sufficient. The boycott grew by at least one family that day.

Unbeknownst to me, at age 12, I had taken my first insignificant step into the farmworker movement journey into history. Later I discovered the power of millions upon millions of such apparently insignificant sacrifices spread around the world when combined with the vision, leadership, and truly significant sacrifices of others.

In 1968 or 1969 I met a farmworker for the first time the same way millions of Americans did—in front of a store. As I approached the store, a young woman told me that she was a farmworker from California and asked me to support the farmworkers' boycott. Her English was limited and my Spanish was nonexistent. I tried to assure her that my family supported farmworkers and that I would not buy any of the forbidden produce. I then continued into the store. It was not clear to me then that I was supposed to boycott the store. (Years later, while working in La Paz, I met Maria Magana. It didn't take long for me to discover that she had been in Indianapolis as a boycottter and that she was the picketer I had encountered. I 'fessed up to crossing her picket line—something Maria never lets me forget.)

At some point, for one day, I joined a grape boycott picket line organized by the local SCLC. That represents the sum total of my involvement in the first grape boycott.

One summer afternoon in 1972, Father Bernard Survil called me. He invited me to go with him and a seminary student to an antiwar conference somewhere in Pennsylvania. I agreed, and soon we were on the road. Not far outside the city limits, Bernie said we needed to decide how to divide up the driving. I hesitantly broke the news that I had recently turned 16 and didn't yet have a driver's license. Bernie turned to the seminarian, who sheepishly stated he couldn't drive standard. Obviously, Bernie had invited the two of us by mistake.

Bernie was also mistaken about the antiwar conference. Upon arrival at the center we discovered that the conference was scheduled for a later date. We were invited to join an "alternative institutions" conference, or something like that. Bernie was too tired to make a U-turn and return to Indianapolis. We stayed.

The convening appeared to me to be a "Who's Who" of the Catholic peace and social justice movement. One of the Berrigan brothers and Dorothy Day were in attendance.

Dorothy Day spoke at length about Cesar and UFWOC, nonviolent change, and voluntary poverty. At the literature table, an issue of *The Catholic Agitator* newspaper featured an in-depth article about the UFWOC lettuce strike by antiwar activist David Harris. Copies of UFWOC's *El Malcriado* were also there.

Driving back home, the three of us decided to help establish a farmworker support group in Indianapolis. We planned to get the group started, identify someone who could coordinate the activities, and then each of us would continue with our other ongoing social justice work. Bernie said he knew that Rev. Garnett Day of the Disciples of Christ had been involved with the Indianapolis grape boycott committee, so we decided to contact him.

Garnett Day supplied me with literature from the National Farm Worker Ministry written by Chris Hartmire. Armed with the information, I presented a resolution in support of the lettuce boycott to a youth group I was involved with. The resolution passed and we sent out a media release.

Several days later I was at work when I was told that David Letterman, then a reporter from a local television station, was on the phone and wanted to talk to me. It was my last day working at Atlas Supermarket and I agreed to talk to him as soon as I left work. To the chagrin of the storeowner, the first television coverage of the lettuce boycott in Indianapolis was filmed in front of his store with someone who had been his employee five minutes earlier providing the interview. He was even less pleased when the cameraman came in to film his scab lettuce. (In later years Letterman made Atlas Supermarket dubiously famous by his recurring references to it during his late night television show.)

Later that year I signed up for NFWM's summer volunteer program. My stint was during the bloody summer of 1973. A few days before my departure date, my dad saw television coverage of Teamster goons beating up on farmworker strikers. I thought my trip would be canceled. He told me he knew that nothing he said would persuade me not to go. He asked me to promise to come back at the end of the summer and attend at least one year of college. I agreed in a heartbeat. My actual plans at the time were for four years of college. Dad said he knew me. He said that once I worked with the farmworker movement full time, I wouldn't want to come back to go to college.

The first days of the program took the volunteers to the picket lines of the Coachella Valley. Walking the picket line, the teenage volunteers from across the country came face to face with the stark reality of power relationship in rural California. The entire power structure was against the strikers. Taunting by the Teamster goons helped us understand the workers' courage. The workers were two months into the strike. Many strikers had suffered beatings by the goons or cops. Others had been shot at. One striker's house had been burned down while he and his family were sleeping. Luckily, they escaped. Still, their spirits were incredibly high. The growers had the goons and the cops and the judges in

their pockets. The workers had faith in themselves, their leaders, and the righteousness of their cause. How could they lose?

From Coachella we were dispatched to the Los Angeles boycott's Harvard House. I was put to work with Ellen Eggers' team, perhaps because Ellen, too, hailed from Indiana. Each morning we spread out to Safeway stores to urge shoppers to buy elsewhere. The first couple of days we worked in teams. By the second week, veteran boycotters that we were, we were dispatched one picketer to a store.

I spent some of the longest, hardest, loneliest days of my life at the 3rd and Vermont and the Hollywood and Vine Safeway parking lots. It was my first time so far from home and the longest stretch. Shy by nature, I struggled just to talk to total strangers. When they cursed at me, spit on me, called me "communist," told me to "go back to Russia," and otherwise mistreated me, the task didn't become any easier.

Several things kept me going. I knew other boycotters suffered the same indignities. I knew that the strikers faced much worse treatment. Most important was the reaction of other strangers. Every day people turned away from Safeway. Others exited the store and proudly showed me that they did not buy grapes. Some would return bringing a soda or an ice cream cone to help me through the afternoon heat. On some days I convinced myself that there would be a letter from a friend or family member waiting for me back at the boycott house.

One woman I will always remember. The hardcore scabs who crossed my picket line daily had been particularly nasty that day. Standing in the lot, contemplating whether I would make it through the day, much less the summer, I felt a tap on my back. I turned to see a very elderly woman with her pull-along shopping cart. She said, "Young man, I want you to know that I walked two miles to go to another store so I wouldn't cross your picket line. Here's a dollar to help the farmworkers. Keep up the good work." I thanked her profusely. As she walked slowly away, I wanted to cry. How could we lose?

A letter-writing campaign to Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons brought a reprieve from the store parking lots. Every morning each of us handwrote about 50 one- or two-sentence letters to Fitz, urging him to get the Teamsters out of the fields. We collected signatures on street corners, college campuses, and door to door. When people signed, we asked them to hand-address an envelope and to donate 25 cents to cover postage and the envelope. During our lunch breaks, we wrote more letters. The campaign generated tens of thousands of letters to Fitz, who publicly lamented the mailbags full of letters he received on a daily basis.

On the Fourth of July weekend I headed up to Delano to meet up with Garnet Day, who was also spending the summer with NFWM. We went to a huge rally at Forty Acres, where Cesar announced the Delano growers had broken off negotiations. The strike would spread to Delano. Ironically, a Los Angeles TV station broadcast *Harvest of Shame* the same time

the rally occurred in Delano. Driving back to Los Angeles I remembered learning somewhere that the growers kept the original broadcast off the air in 1960. I hadn't seen much evidence that the growers' attitude toward workers had changed in the intervening 13 years.

A few days before the summer program came to an end, all the volunteers were called to a meeting in the front yard of Harvard House. LeRoy Chatfield spoke at the end of the meeting. He said he knew a lot of us would be leaving soon, heading back to college. "Ask yourselves this question. Can you think of anything more important to do with your lives right now than to help farmworkers build their union?" I did and I couldn't.

On that Saturday's weekly call home, I suggested to Dad that perhaps I could stay a few more months. He quickly reminded me of a promise made.

I returned to Indiana on schedule and attended college for one year where I "majored" in farmworker support committee work. In a very small article in the *Indianapolis Star* I learned of the deaths of strikers Juan de la Cruz and Nagi Daifullah. From one of the other NFWM summer volunteers, I discovered that LeRoy left the union shortly after the meeting at Harvard House. Although I was tremendously surprised to learn about LeRoy leaving, my answer to his question didn't change.

My promise fulfilled to Dad, I returned to the union, joining the Chicago boycott staff in the summer of 1974. I made a one-year commitment. Dad tried to persuade me that I should stay in college and then go to law school. As a lawyer, he said, I could make a "real contribution" to the union. I argued that the union faced a crisis of survival. "Without boycott staff now, it may not be around when I complete law school six or seven years from now."

I arrived in Chicago on a Sunday afternoon in June of 1974. At the time, some of the volunteer staff and farmworker strikers were housed in a two-story house on Lakeshore Drive. During the school year the house was used by students at Mundelein College, a Catholic women's institution. Mundelein let the union use it during the summer.

Supporters and staff gathered there on Sunday evenings for potluck dinners, boycott reports and a Catholic mass. The room buzzed that evening with the report that the car of one of the staff members had been torched while he was picketing a fruit market that day. I made a mental note not to report that detail to my family when I called to let them know that I arrived safely in Chicago.

Marcos Muñoz was the Chicago boycott director. I knew of his place in the movement history as the organizer of the "Boston Grape Party" during the first grape boycott. Chicago would be different from Los Angeles. In L.A., I merely went where I was assigned to go by the team captain. Here I would have more responsibility. I was excited that I would be taught to organize by Marcos.

On Monday I went to the boycott office. A large map of the Chicago area hung on the wall. Red magic marker lines divided it into quadrants. "This is your area," Marcos said, pointing to an area extending from downtown north to the northern suburbs and west to the western suburbs.

Marcos handed me a shoebox-full of 3-by-5 index cards with names and addresses on them. He explained that the people whose names were on the cards had helped the union at some point. He told me I was supposed to "organize the area." He told me where and when my first picket line would be. I asked how I should start and he said it was up to me. I then asked where I would work from and he informed me that my first task was to find donated office space with phone service. My first and only training session with Marcos was over and I was sent out to organize.

I don't recall who offered me space but somehow I found an office. Sitting in the drab office furnished only with a desk, a metal folding chair, and a phone, I stared at the box of index cards, took a deep breath, and picked up the receiver. I was calling total strangers to ask them to join me on a picket line. Many numbers were disconnected. I called other numbers only to be informed that the person I was looking for had passed away several years prior. The more I realized how outdated the cards were, the more hesitant I became to make the calls. Putting together my first picket line in Chicago didn't seem to be going so well.

Pre-dawn picket lines several days a week at the Chicago produce terminal were part of the regimen. Most afternoons during the rush hour we did human billboarding, which involved holding up large "Boycott Grapes" picket signs at busy intersections. On Saturdays we picketed stores or fruit stands. On Sundays we went to churches to talk about the boycott and take "second collections."

After a few months I wasn't making much progress. I thought that if I just kept at it, eventually I would get the hang of it. Marcos seemingly had a different view. At a meeting he told me that I could stay in Chicago if I wanted or he could send me to open up a boycott office somewhere else in Illinois. That way, he said, I would "sink or drown." Driving back from the meeting I tried to figure out if Marcos had said "sink or drown" mistakenly, because of his limited English, or whether he had said it purposefully to let me know his level of confidence in my ability.

I never got the opportunity to accept Marcos's offer. In early 1975 Marcos resigned and Eliseo Medina became the new director. Eliseo had run the first grape boycott in Chicago and supporters were enthusiastic about his return.

Soon after his arrival in Chicago, Eliseo conducted house meeting campaign training. All staff and many key supporters attended this event to be taught the Fred Ross house meeting plan.

The plan was deceptively simple. A phone call to a supporter leads to a personal visit. The personal visit results in a house meeting in which the host has invited five to ten friends and neighbors. At the house meetings we presented a history of the union, talked about the current crisis, and made the “pitch.” We solicited donations, picket line volunteers, and more house meetings. Everyone at the meeting committed to do something to help the movement, even if it was only boycotting grapes and Gallo wine.

Each organizer built an “area committee,” which organized monthly area-wide meetings. From the area-wide meetings we would build the citywide event—in this case, the Chicago premiere of *Fighting for Our Lives*, which documented the bloody summer of 1973. All the while, the number of picket lines and pickets continued to grow.

I soon had my house meeting campaign going relatively well and got fairly good participation in the area-wide meetings. Although I realized I would never be one of the movement’s star organizers, I also knew that I would not “sink or drown.” But that was all that was needed to help build the movement.

In early 1975 hundreds of boycott staff members across the country received similar training. On any given day that year there were hundreds of house meetings from coast to coast. Day by day, week by week, phone call by phone call, personal visit by personal visit, house meeting by house meeting, area-wide meeting by area-wide meeting, and citywide event by citywide event, the farmworker message was carried across the country. And the public responded. In the spring of 1975, the combined pressures of the strikes, the march on Gallo, and the international boycott resulted in the farm labor law being signed by Governor Jerry Brown. The boycott had won a new lease on life for the union.

My “one year commitment” lasted from June of 1974 until May of 1989. I came to know some of the most dedicated, talented, and tenacious people I would ever meet. I met and married Magdalena Beltran in La Paz. Three of our four children were born in a small town named Delano. Our second daughter, Vanessa, learned to walk while attending masses at Forty Acres during Cesar’s last public fast.

My journey took me from boycott staff to administrative assistant for Cesar, to contract administrator, to paralegal, to legal apprentice, and finally to attorney.

Through all those years I was constantly reminded of how visionary leadership, commitment, great sacrifices by a relatively few people, and seemingly insignificant sacrifices by millions of other people can come together to change the world.