

Despie (Fausch) Bonadies 1974–1975

I was 17 years old and getting ready to head off to college when the United Farm Workers union first made its way into my everyday consciousness. It was 1972, and I was holed up in my basement that entire summer, watching the news, reading about the 1960s, and writing long, stream-of-conscious journal entries in dime-store spiral notebooks. I was living in South Bend, Indiana, where I had lived all my life as a good Greek-American girl, and I was counting the days until I left home to live in the hippie haven of my dreams: Ann Arbor, Michigan. And like many other would-be teenage activists, I was glued to the television set that summer to see if George McGovern was going to be nominated as the Democratic presidential candidate at the Democratic National Convention in Miami.

I remember quite a few odd details about that convention, but the scenes I remember most came from watching the California delegation. The leaders were Dolores Huerta and Willie Brown, and every time either of them had the floor, they would announce that they were from California, home of “the United Farm Workers Union Lettuce Boycott!” Other states began responding to the California call and announced their states’ support of the boycott as well—the spirit of the boycott was infectious. And I remember wondering what the boycott was about and why farmworkers had switched to boycotting lettuce instead of grapes. (The grape boycott had been a cause I had stored away in the deep recesses of my memory bank, with a long list of other 1960s grievances that had taken a back seat in my mind to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement.) But despite the enthusiasm I felt for these UFW activists and supporters I saw while watching the convention in my basement that summer, I concentrated on my life plans and readied myself for college and dreams of hippie/lefty activism. I left for Ann Arbor in September.

When I got to Ann Arbor, my political choices were no longer as obvious as they had been in Indiana. Where I had grown up in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the world had become polarized, yet simplified. Understandably, my youth colored my perspective, but everything to me at the time seemed relatively black and white in the midst of all of the controversies: you were either for the Vietnam War, or against it; you either loved or hated Martin Luther King, Jr.; you either liked Motown and the Beatles or you sang “Okie from Muskogee”; you either identified with John Wayne in *True Grit* or Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*. In my mind there was no middle ground. It was, “Which side are you on?” and it seemed like we all had our individual answers. I was on the side of civil rights, Daniel Ellsberg, the Chicago 7, and Gloria Steinem. OK, I was also a top student, a repressed middle-class girl who wore polyester jumpers and nylons, a musical theater fan, and the college-bound daughter of a Greek-American woman who had been pulled out of school in the sixth grade. But none of these things seemed contradictory to me at the time. Years later, I would come to understand how my personal history coincided perfectly with the movements for freedom and justice that blossomed in the 1960s. But all I knew then, and all I needed to know, was that I was for human rights, liberty, and dignity. As long as whatever I did was consistent with those values, nothing seemed “uncool” or politically incorrect, and everything else seemed to fall in line.

But the political landscape in Ann Arbor in the fall of 1972 was very different from the one I came from. Everyone was left of center—and the world changed from black and white to gray just 180 miles from my hometown. Did you work within the system and the Democratic Party, or did you work outside the system with a third political party? What was your strategy, violent or nonviolent? Should the dorm halls be racially integrated or should African-American students have their own hall for purposes of self-determination? On and on they came, questions for which no one seemed to have pat answers. I grappled with issues and ideas with my friends deep into the night and discovered hallucinogenic drugs along the way, which only made my confusion take on a somewhat mystical certainty. Yet my call to activism would not let me rest. I had to do something, but what? With all the voices inside and outside of my head arguing and debating all the sides of so many issues, what could I possibly do that was just simply the right thing to do—a righteous case that nobody, including myself, could question?

The United Farm Workers Lettuce Boycott seemed the perfect cause for me to support during those confusing times. It was something that had no gray area in my mind. Farmworkers were poor and oppressed and were asking for the rest of Americans to do something very simple: exert their consumer power to convince big companies to give poor people living wages and decent living conditions. Slowly and sporadically, I started joining a local UFW picket line in Ann Arbor, which was coordinated by a local high school student. I was too caught up in my own identity crisis at the time to be a hard-core activist in any one cause, but the UFW definitely satisfied my need to do something good for somebody somewhere, without reservations.

It was in Ann Arbor that I also learned that I had a peculiar connection with the UFW when I was picketing: Despite the fact that I look just like my Greek grandmother, people assumed that I was Mexican. Suffice it to say that I always felt complimented when someone commented upon my physical affinity to Mexican features, and it made for some interesting stories. But ultimately my draw to the United Farm Workers Union had little to do with my appearance. It was a cause that was obviously “good” with a capital G. And it was a cause I knew I was willing to contribute to whenever the opportunity arose. That time came in the summer of 1974.

By 1974 I had dropped out of college and was on some kind of existential quest for meaning and creative fulfillment. My friend Susan and I decided to take a road trip to California. I had been working for about six months at the U-Cellar, the University of Michigan student cooperative bookstore, and had saved enough money to take a two-month vacation. At the beginning of July, off we went.

The counterculture was such a given by then that when we got to California we stupidly thought nothing of hitchhiking together everywhere. We had a couple of bad-feeling rides, which we bailed on pretty quickly, but after spending some time in San Francisco, we headed up the coast and ended up in a hippie commune in Oregon along Interstate 5.

Susan loved it and I hated it. So I left her there and I took a Greyhound bus back to San Francisco. With a month left before I had to report back to work in Ann Arbor, I went to the local UFW boycott house in San Francisco—a convent, of course. I told the coordinator at the time, Dan Sudran, that I would work full time for the UFW for one month in exchange for room and board. He called Ann Arbor to make sure I was an aboveboard supporter of the union and agreed to take me on when I passed inspection.

That evening I went downstairs at dinnertime and met the rest of the boycott staff. There was a farmworker named Moreno on staff who cooked a lot for the boycott house. I remember my first night going into the kitchen on the way to the dining room and there was a big vat of what looked to be soup. When I asked Moreno what the soup was, he told me it was chili. I was so excited. “I *love* chili!” I told him, before I quickly found a bowl and filled it to the brim. He looked at me a bit quizzically, but I got my bowl and went into the dining room. I sat down at the nearest vacant seat, which happened to be the head of a very long table. Everyone stared at me with awkward silence as I sat down, obviously because I was a new staff member. To break the ice, I said the same thing I had told Moreno, “I love chili!” I said enthusiastically, and took my soup spoon and dug in, while the rest of the staffers looked at me in total confusion. After trying Moreno’s soup, I gasped and began to cry—my throat was on fire! “What kind of chili is this?!” I cried, frantically running into the kitchen to find a glass of water. When I returned, everyone looked even more confused. “*Tu no eres mexicana?*” asked Moreno. With tears still running down my face from the soup, I told him that I was not Chicana and that I was Greek, and everybody began to laugh. I had not helped myself to a bowl of chili, it was a bowl of chile.

My month in San Francisco was a whirl of activity. My favorite memory at the time was the day Richard Nixon resigned from office. We all went down to Fisherman’s Wharf for the spontaneous celebration and sold “Nixon Eats Lettuce” buttons as collector’s items. It was a great party. But my main duty that month was to be assigned to any picket line that needed me. The Safeway boycott was over by then, so we were asking people who were shopping to boycott lettuce, grapes, and Gallo wine. It was in San Francisco I learned that my truest pleasure in the organizing process was picketing. Of course, this was true of many, and the UFW made it so easy for us, because the cause was so righteous and accessible to anyone who wanted to help. And everyone was invited to help, to be a part of doing something good for people who deserved a chance. But the true joy I got out of picketing was something I never expected. It totally exhilarated me to involve as many people as possible in an action that would support someone else’s struggle for freedom and justice. The idea of showing any and all individuals who approached me that *their* actions mattered, that they could make a difference in ending the suffering of another human being, fulfilled me to the depths of my soul. I would approach *anybody* and try to talk him or her into supporting our cause, no matter what the person looked like. It was years later, after I left the UFW, that I came to understand why I loved this experience so much—why I needed to do it—and why to this day I try to do even something small to support struggles of others who are relatively powerless in an unjust situation.

When I was growing up, I was like many, many other children who were raised in somewhat dysfunctional families. There is certainly no need to go into details, but suffice it to say that in my extended family, on my mother's side, one of my relatives, usually in an alcoholic stupor, subjected me to verbal, emotional, and physical abuse. The amazing thing about this experience was that, even at a young age, I knew he was—at the time anyway—out of his mind. I was no more than eight years old, yet I knew that this relative was somehow mentally sick, and even as he was hurting me I didn't completely blame him for his actions.

It was the other adults in the family that I couldn't understand. How could they allow this obviously sick relative to hurt me, while they stood by and did nothing? How could they not intervene. *He* was temporarily insane and *I* was a powerless child, but *they* had the power to stop him and they didn't! Even as a child, I held the other adults, who did nothing to stop my relative's behavior, accountable for my abuse.

Finally, one of my relatives did exercise her power and my abuse ceased. When I got older, I read about the civil rights movement in the South, or the Holocaust, or the Underground Railroad. And any time I would think about the choice to stand up for others, the times when people who were *not* the victims of horrible atrocities had a choice whether to fight the horror inflicted upon others or to look the other way and ignore the abuse of others, I prayed that I would have had the courage to stand up for the ones who were subjected to misery but powerless to stop it by themselves. I prayed that I would not have looked the other way when people were being hurt.

I'm sure, as clichéd as this may sound, that this is why I was attracted to human rights activism initially and why the UFW, and any picket line, nourished my spirit. It allowed me to participate in the process of standing up for someone else and in so doing magically allowed me to continually stand up for myself again and again. This has been a healing and fulfilling path of mine all my life. Sometimes I speak up more loudly than other times and sometimes I do more action than other times. But nothing makes me feel more connected to the human race than when I stand up and refuse to stand idly by when someone else is subjected to needless suffering. And the UFW was the perfect place for me to do this because it welcomed my participation and allowed me to encourage and enlist others to participate in this human connection. The UFW was, and still is, a unique personal gift for many of us in this way, and I will always be eternally grateful for the experience and opportunity it gave me to walk a human path in an inhuman world.