

Mike Lacinak 1974–1978

I'm glad to participate in this documentation project. An old friend, Patty Park, looked me up and put me in touch with LeRoy. I'd like to document some of the Canadian experience. It's also an opportunity to remember and reflect.

I encountered the UFW in Toronto one October Sunday in 1973. In my last year at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, I was attending Sunday mass at the campus parish. A Jesuit priest (whose name I think was Father Fox) celebrated mass that Sunday. Several farmworker families who had just moved to Toronto also attended the mass. The priest told of his arrest on the picket lines in California and the strike and boycott of the farmworkers. This was all news to me. I learned that Cesar Chavez was coming to Toronto in a few weeks. The next month I found myself in a march with my wife and 2000 other people through the downtown streets of Toronto. So it began.

I must have signed something, because soon I found myself leafleting my neighborhood Dominion store. That winter my son Jeremy was born and the following spring I graduated from college. I worked in YMCA day camp that summer with no immediate career plans for the fall. It was during that summer of 1974 that my wife and I attended a daylong staff recruitment program. We were hooked. On Labor Day of 1974 we began our full-time staff status. I think I was struck by the absolute injustice of the grower-Teamster alliance against the farmworkers and the dedication and spunk of the farmworker movement. It felt so important to be a part of this.

Memories of 30 years ago all blend and soften. Lots of faces and more names have receded. I wish I were a better historian.

I do remember moving into the "Farmworker House" with Paul and Barb and their two kids. On that Labor Day of 1974 my wife and I were now official farmworker staff with all the benefits—room and board and \$5 a week.

If I learned one thing, it was how to organize. Two of Fred Ross's pithy sentences have never left me. "Detail is the essence of organizing" and "Reminding is the essence of organizing." I had four great teachers: Marshall Ganz, Jessica Govea, Fred Ross, and Patty Park. Marshall was the director of the Canadian boycott. He had returned to Toronto, having directed the initial boycott efforts in Canada beginning in 1967. He was a consummate organizer, full of passion, with a wonderful laugh. He could inspire and hold people accountable. Jessica was a terrific organizer. She was the liaison with the Canadian labor movement and could light a fire under any labor audience. Patty was Canadian. Her father, Eamon Park, had been an officer of the United Steelworkers and later with the International Labor Organization in Geneva. Patty had been on the UFW staff in Detroit and was back home in Toronto. She was a supporter par excellence as well as a friend. She knew absolutely everyone in the labor movement and in the New Democratic Party, the

progressive party in Canada. Patty was always full of great stories and knew how to make the hard work more human and fun.

Like all boycott staff, I got my own area of the city to organize, which was the northern part of Toronto. The gift of that area was that it contained a large part of the Jewish community. I met some great folks and began to appreciate the nuances and strong value for social justice within both the religious and secular Jewish community. I fondly remember attending Friday night services sporting a yarmulke. When I was working in that area, we had the good fortune to have Fred Ross come to Toronto to train us in building a community organization through house meetings. Learning the history of the movement from Fred and then learning how to put that into a message and a system for building an organization was an incredible education. It sold me even more on working for the union. The goal was to continually increase picket lines at more Dominion stores. I learned my own truism: the essence of organizing is relationship. The farmworker movement was the power of connecting person to person and the power of community. You met the best folks in a city on the boycott.

At the end of each Saturday picket, the whole staff and many supporters would gather at a church basement or union hall in the central city for mass and a potluck. While we ate, different areas of the city would give their reports of the day's activities. There were always great stories filled with humor and often courage. I still remember a petite high school student giving her picketing report. A brawny policeman had approached her on the picket line. He gruffly asked her who the leader was. She slyly and truthfully responded, "There's a little bit of leadership in all of us." How funny and true. These shared experiences and potluck celebrations connected us as community. There would be *actos* and songs. My guitar came in handy. I learned all the union songs and learned to sing (if not to speak) in Spanish. It was great fun to put boycott parodies to familiar tunes and sing them at potlucks aimed at our archenemy, Dominion stores.

While Dominion never did remove the grapes, we gave them hell and had significant impact in the third largest grape market in North America. The campaign grew and grew, reaching a climax one December. We began having "pray-ins" next to the grapes inside stores, and Dominion backed down and did not arrest us. This was followed by a mass sit-in by religious leaders in their headquarters. I remember the soul-searching of some of these leaders as they wrestled with the first arrest of their lives. The farmworker movement had a way of turning up the intensity for those who invested themselves.

As I write this, it is the Christmas season and that brings back many memories. The above-mentioned campaign occurred through the Christmas season. There were always holiday gatherings at the farmworker house with much fun, song, and revelry. One Christmas, Marshall returned with news from an executive board meeting, but more important, with tamales from Jessica's family.

Then there were the cross-country trips by bus to the UFW conventions in Fresno. It was a great time. Seeing the country. Hooking up and meeting other boycott staff from New York, Detroit, and Chicago and traveling together. Leading the convention in song with Jessica was a powerful experience.

As everyone did on the boycott, I began to work with the local unions in my area as well as union leadership in the city. For a middle-class kid who had had no previous contact with unions, this was an education. I not only began to appreciate the importance of the UFW, but of all unions. I began to understand Canadian workers' struggles. And I met some of the most real people I'd ever known. I remember traveling to Ottawa on a train full of union members, going from car to car with my guitar singing union songs as we traveled to a mass labor demonstration. Solidarity is a two-way street, I learned.

Having been raised Catholic; I missed the social justice tradition of my faith. In the UFW I learned it and lived it. Witnessing church folk as activists was invigorating. Seeing church, temple, and union people work side by side was powerful. The UFW was a spiritual and political experience.

By 1975 the boycott pressure forced the growers to agree to the California Labor Relations Act, giving farmworkers the right to vote in union representation elections. Marshall returned to California to head up the union election drives. Soon Jessica and other farmworkers followed. The boycott staff was reduced and I was asked to lead the boycott in Toronto. After a while the long days took a toll on my relationship with my wife and son, so we took a leave of absence to decide whether or not to stay with the union. This was in January of 1976.

We decided to stay. I passed on the leadership to Paul Hastie, who had led the boycott in Ottawa. We found daycare for Jeremy, and Cathy was able to again work full time. I took over working on media relations.

Labor Day of 1976 found us in California. Boycott staff were asked to work on the Proposition 13 campaign—a statewide referendum guaranteeing farmworkers the right to vote. My wife and I worked in South L.A. It was an invigorating campaign and good to work in California. It left me with great memories of supporters in the South L.A. My five minutes of fame was leading a college rally in song to warm up the crowd for the main speaker, Kris Kristofferson. We lost the campaign, and much union soul-searching followed. I remember a rainy week in La Paz, the UFW headquarters near Bakersfield, as the union tried to figure out how to re-deploy boycott staff. One bright spot in that week was Fred Ross taking boycott staff on a tour of a camp in Weedpatch where John Steinbeck scratched out notes for the *Grapes of Wrath* and where Woody Guthrie came up on weekends from his radio job in L.A. to work with migrant workers.

We returned to Toronto. We worked on small targeted boycotts like Sun Maid as the union stepped up its efforts to win elections and negotiate contracts. One of my best memories

of that year combines two events just days apart: the Canadian Solidarity Dinner and the birth of my son Chris. The Canadian Solidarity Dinner was a hugely successful fundraiser celebrating 10 years of UFW support in Canada. We brought back Marshall and Jessica as the speakers and were able to raise some significant money. Thank goodness Patty helped us with cooking the Mexican food—all the farmworkers had returned to California! As I write this I'm looking at the program book for the dinner filled with ads, history, faces and names, and memories. The outpouring of support received from British Columbia to the Maritimes was a testament to the impact of Canada on the UFW and the UFW on Canada.

Labor Day of 1977 found us in La Paz. We left the boycott efforts in the hands of mostly Canadian staff and supporters. For a while I coordinated boycott efforts from La Paz and then worked at other administrative jobs at the union headquarters. It gave me an opportunity to work with Cesar, Chris Hartmire, and some great folks in La Paz. I was also able to get to know other areas and staff in the state. But La Paz was isolated. It was beginning to be time to move on. We now had two kids and my wife, Cathy, was eager to be in a place with daycare and where she could begin to tend to her own career. We decided to leave. The decision was gut-wrenching but right. We left La Paz on Labor Day of 1978—four years to the day we had joined the full-time staff.

We headed back for Toronto but decided to stay put in our hometown of Cincinnati to be near family. My wife did some community organizing and then went to law school to join Tom Kircher's law firm doing labor law. Tom is Bill Kircher's son. Bill was a key AFL-CIO leader responsible for AFL-CIO support for the UFW in the early years.

Organizing dies hard. Like many, I went on to do community organizing for a local organizing project, putting my skills to good use. As has been noted by many, the UFW was a huge organizing school.

In 1981, the beginning of the Reagan era, I was able to secure a job with the Cincinnati AFL-CIO Labor Council and United Way as an AFL-CIO community services liaison. It was an opportunity to work with the labor community in my hometown. This job was made possible by my UFW work.

Life continued to change. I divorced and remarried. I completed a master's degree in social work and now work as a counselor for a community mental health agency as well as a part-time private practice. I'm involved in local activism and politics, working on such issues as neighborhood-friendly zoning and restricting the growth of a local airport. I'm an officer in my neighborhood community council.

I've continued some UFW relationships. Over the years I've been in touch with a handful of supporters in Toronto. We have been able to assist UFW folks from time to time as they came through the city, including a couple of trips Cesar made here before he died. I was able to foster relationships between the local labor movement and the UFW through the 1980s.

As I reflect on my experience, my overwhelming sense is positive. There were dark times. It was often a question of whether to stay or leave. My idealism and “workaholism” needed to mellow and balance. UFW work could be harsh and unrelenting. And the UFW changed my life. I would never look at things the same way. It gave me an intense experience of the power and possibility of community. And I know the UFW changed the life of millions of others—consumers who could help by their choice, farmworkers who benefited from union contracts, and supporters and staff who learned how to organize. And in the process I’m sure the UFW experience has positively impacted communities across North America in myriad ways.