

David Koehler 1974 -1978

A Look Back: the Influence of the Farmworkers on My Life

Working for both the United Farmworkers (UFW) and the National Farmworkers Ministry (NFWM) during the 1970s forever altered my life. Yet today, those who know my history still ask, “Did you really know Cesar Chavez? What was he like?”

My experiences at UFW and the NFWM blessed my life twofold: a wonderful marriage and career. I met and married my wife, Nora Sullivan, a staff member of the UFW in Ohio. And the experience generated my current position as executive director of the Peoria Area Labor Management Council (PALM). In 1985, when the board of directors selected me to lead the organization, a deciding factor was the trust that organized labor placed in me.

Looking back, I now realize that it wasn't events that shaped my life—it was the people. These were good people for whom I felt a deep, abiding respect. Their influence helped me choose the path which turned my summer job into so much more than a six-year adventure. Thank you UFW and NFWM for a rewarding experience.

Meeting Olgha

I spent the majority of my youth in South Dakota, the son of a minister. I learned early how clergy can be called upon to serve wherever they're needed, as my family had moved to Phoenix, Arizona, for the years 1959 to 1961 while my father helped establish a new United Church of Christ congregation. We returned to South Dakota where I graduated from high school and later Yankton College. I subsequently moved to Dayton, Ohio, to attend seminary. I first enrolled at Payne Seminary (African Methodist Episcopal) and later graduated from United Theological Seminary (United Methodist). My church affiliation, however, still rests with the United Church of Christ.

Olgha Sierra Sandman, longtime activist and UFW supporter, lived in Dayton in the early 1970s. During the winter of 1972, she came to Payne Seminary to recruit a seminarian to work for the NFWM for the summer. Listening to Olgha's powerful and passionate discussions about the farmworkers hooked me. I had found a calling.

I applied for the summer position, was hired, and worked out of the NFWM office in Dayton. I met with and spoke to the migrant farmworkers in Darke County, Ohio, who came to work in the tomato fields. I gathered information on any problems they might encounter and identified resources to help them.

Even though some had come from Florida, the majority of the farmworkers hailed from the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. They came to Ohio in late spring to plant tomatoes. Many would go to Michigan to pick fruit and cucumbers in the summer and would return for the tomato harvest in the fall.

Equipped with mostly Spanish-language editions of *El Malcriado*, a newspaper published by the UFW, I journeyed forth determined to help.

I first observed the plight of migrant farmworkers when I discovered more than 35 people living in a dilapidated seven-room house in one of the labor camps. Everyone had to use a makeshift bathroom and shower behind the house.

The cycle of servitude was difficult to break. One woman told me she had to borrow money from the labor contractor each year to help her family survive the winter. Then she and her children would have to work for the contractor the next year to pay off the debt. Her children would be two months behind in school when they returned home to Texas, since the entire family would stay in Ohio through late October to get their year-end bonus.

Farmworkers had to stay until the end of harvest to earn what was really a retainer. Money was held back from their paychecks and only paid if the workers toiled through the end of the harvest. This woman's parents had lived this way and now she and her children had to look forward to the same life.

A framed poster hangs in my office, which shows a young girl picking tomatoes. I need only look at the poster to remember the struggle of the families I met that summer. The caption on the poster reads:

Name: withheld
Age: 10
Crop: Tomatoes
Pay Rate: 19 cents per 33-pound hamper
(67 cents per hour)
Date: September 25, 1971
Place: Findlay, Ohio

One day while traveling in Darke County, I encountered a particularly friendly group of workers. There were no contractors or growers present, and one of the workers motioned me behind the abandoned schoolhouse where they lived. When we were safely out of sight he proudly showed me his United Farm Workers union card. He had obtained the card while working under a UFW contract in Florida for Minute Maid orange juice. The local grower or contractor would have fired him immediately if either had seen the union card.

Later that summer I joined the National Farm Worker Ministry staff. I met both Cesar Chavez, president and founder of the UFW, and Chris Hartmire, the executive director of the NFWM. Even now when I see Chris, I think back on all the good times we had at NFWM staff meetings. I can also vividly recall the excitement that would race through me when Chris or Sue Miner, his assistant, would call with a new assignment.

Arizona, Home of the Original Recall

In the fall of 1972 the NFWM assigned me, a brand-new staff member, to Arizona. I arrived full of determination to help with the recall of Governor Jack Williams. Launched by Cesar Chavez, the recall was a response to anti-farmworker legislation signed into law by Governor Williams, a man who also proudly declared a John Birch Day in Arizona.

I met Jim Drake, the recall coordinator, and Richard and Barbara Cook. I jumped right in and went to work. And I quickly discovered the difficulty of what at that time was virtually unheard of: a recall. The entire process left an indelible impact on me. Despite political maneuvering, which eventually foiled the recall, standing in front of a shopping center in Tucson for 12 hours a day collecting signatures prepared me for many future UFW experiences.

We actually had a lot of fun. We distributed thousands of black-and-orange bumper stickers with the slogan “Hit the Road Jack.” The campaign to remove Jack Williams as governor became an overnight hit. The stickers appeared everywhere, especially among those who were tired of the conservative, repressive politics of Arizona.

The Arizona experience tested my mettle. Seven or eight UFW staff lived in the boycott house in Tucson. Every one of us lived a different schedule, so we weren’t able to establish any organized or meaningful camaraderie. I’m not a clean freak, but the dirty dishes, cockroaches, and spoiled food were too much for a kid from South Dakota. I found new housing with a group of Redemptorist priests working with a local Indian tribe in South Tucson.

In late summer of 1973, I experienced the highlight of my time in Arizona with the UFW. Dorothy Day, radical journalist and co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, visited the house where the priests and I lived. I pinched myself in disbelief. I had met one of my heroes and she was sitting in the house I called home.

Dorothy had come to visit a Catholic nun who was living in Tucson. The two of them had been arrested and shared a jail cell in Salinas, California, that summer. I sat on the floor and soaked in every word as she talked. I winced at every detail of her arrest and incarceration. Both of them had been arrested in 1973 during what was called the “Bloody Summer” strike. (The union had come under massive frontal assault as the growers had arbitrarily canceled all UFW contracts and forced workers to join the Teamsters union under a sweetheart contract.)

Years later, while attending the Strawberry March in Watsonville, California, in 1998, I meet Ron Carey, at that time the new president of the Teamsters, who was there to support the UFW. My eyes filled watching the Teamsters march in solidarity with the UFW. How times had changed.

Viva La Boycott

The violence-filled summer of 1973 saw most of the progress made by the UFW grind to a halt. Attention quickly turned to a boycott. I traveled back to Dayton, Ohio, to both coordinate the local boycott efforts and finish my seminary work. After I graduated in June of 1974, I was transferred to Cleveland to direct the boycott there following the transfer of Eliseo Medina, the previous director, to Chicago.

In seminary, I studied the theology of serving the poor and disenfranchised, which was also the spirit of the NFWM. But the farmworkers helped me live it—an even more valuable lesson.

I was ordained as a minister of the United Church of Christ shortly after graduation from seminary. Eliseo convinced me to proudly display my new status as a member of the clergy by purchasing a clerical collar. At first I protested. But he was adamant. “We want people to know you are clergy when you are on the picket line,” he argued. I conceded and wore it on special occasions. Even though I rarely wear it, the collar still hangs in my closet today as a reminder of my years with the farmworkers.

In 1973, before I departed Arizona for Ohio, Cesar and Chris sent me to the United Church of Christ General Synod meeting in St. Louis. I went to help organize a delegation of church members to go to Coachella, California, a grape-growing area near Indio. A powerful moment in the UFW struggle occurred when 95 UCC delegates, attending their biannual conference, were commissioned to witness to the farmworkers in their time of need.

The effort resulted in national attention, claiming the top spot on both the UPI and AP wire services the morning of Tuesday, June 26, 1973—but only until midmorning. History also notes that morning as the moment John Dean took the stand for the first time in the impeachment hearings of President Richard Nixon. The story of the efforts by the 95 UCC delegates on behalf of the farmworkers can be found on pages 54 and 55 of Ann McGregor and Cindy Wathen’s book, *Remembering Cesar: The Legacy of Cesar Chavez* (Quill Driver Books, Clovis, CA, 2000). In July of 2003, I attended the UCC General Synod’s 30th anniversary celebration of the Coachella 95’s historic trip.

Free the Fisher-Fazio 22

With the boycott in full swing, it appeared as if every community of any size had a boycott committee. The UFW called all the Midwest boycott leaders to Dayton, Ohio. The local committee had chosen Fisher-Fazio stores as the weekly target for their informational picket lines during the same weekend. All the visiting UFW staff joined the local supporters. The spirited picket line included lots of marching and singing.

The store manager observed the intensity of the boycott line and called the sheriff's department. Auxiliary deputies from Montgomery County arrived. The deputies overreacted and beat out our headlights and car windows with nightsticks. They even shoved a pregnant woman. Eventually they arrested 22 of us. Several hours later, a large group of supporters gathered outside the county jail to protest the arrest of the Fisher-Fazio 22.

Luck smiled on us. Someone noticed the state's attorney had a UFW poster, signed by Cesar Chavez, on his office wall. The charges were dismissed before the trial began.

Road Trip

In 1975, Cesar decided to invite the entire boycott staff to attend the UFW convention in Fresno, California. The union bought some old Greyhound buses to provide low-cost, nonstop travel to California. We quickly determined we had to park on a downhill slope! In order to start the bus we had to push it and have the driver "pop the clutch." Etched in my memory is a picture of us pushing the bus on a dirt road near Anita, Iowa.

Hold That Marriage, the Proposition Calls

Less than a year after the convention I was back in Cleveland working on the boycott. Nora Sullivan, another staff member, and I planned to get married in the spring of 1976. However, Cesar decided to put an initiative on the California ballot, later known as Proposition 14, which would lock the Agricultural Labor Relations Act into the state's constitution.

Instead of planning a wedding, we headed to California, where the UFW placed me in charge of the southernmost section of Los Angeles County (south of Artesia Blvd.). I was glad I had learned how to conduct a petition drive in Tucson.

What a campaign! We would work all day and evening and share dinner with the staff at 10 p.m. Then I would attend a coordinators' meeting with Marshall Ganz, the director of the Proposition 14 effort, until the wee hours of the morning.

Like all petition drives, Proposition 14 relied on large numbers of "signers." The good news was that there was a definite date for completion, which provided all of us with an immediate, identifiable "end in sight." The bad news: Never before had anyone attempted to collect so many signatures in such a short time frame. The UFW hit the ground running. And we never let up. A training team visited staff locations and offered assistance and instruction on how to maximize production.

As we moved forward, creative solutions popped up. We had decided to ask for donations to help pay for the Proposition 14 campaign. We developed a can worn around the neck with labels that stated "HELP THE FARMWORKERS." By the end of the petition drive,

we realized if we asked people for a dollar, we generally got a dollar, and as is typical, those who had the least gave the most. By the end of the campaign we raised thousands of dollars to offset the cost of the effort.

I do regret missing the party when the UFW submitted the petitions. I'm not quite sure if the lack of sleep, the constant stress, the midnight meals, or maybe even the mucho jalapeños caused an ulcer, but I was told to lie low. Nora and I returned to Cleveland, Ohio, and in June we were married.

New York, New York

Cesar sent me to New York City in 1977 to direct the boycott. Talk about culture shock! Born and raised on the plains of South Dakota, I had barely adjusted to life in Cleveland and sprawling Los Angeles. Suddenly Nora and I lived in the boycott house on West 84th Street in crowded Manhattan. More people lived on our block than in the town where I grew up.

A large number of recruits also entered the boycott at that time. Fred Ross came to New York to train our staff of 30. Working closely with Fred, who was very tough yet compassionate, and then developing a friendship with him remains one of the highlights of my time with the UFW.

Fred taught us all how to "tell the story." We would practice how to conduct a house meeting for hours on end. Fred would always remind us not to just talk *about* the story, but rather *tell* the story. What he really taught us was how to *feel* the story.

Fred and I spent many hours after meals simply talking, exchanging ideas, thoughts, and philosophies. I remember Fred's dream of forming a poor people's union. "Wouldn't it be great," he'd say, "if we could link together with poor people in the city to help provide them with a health care plan, or a pension plan, or even money to bury their dead?"

Fred captivated listeners with his stories about the early days of the UFW. I remember one "legend in the movement" about how Fred had persuaded Cesar to arrange a house meeting. What he didn't know was the meeting was a set-up. Cesar was very suspicious of Fred. The plan called for everyone to ignore him at the meeting. As the meeting progressed Cesar became riveted by what Fred talked about and Cesar scolded the others for not paying attention and taking him seriously.

Fred Ross knew injustice when he saw it. And he dedicated his life to helping the disenfranchised. On my list of heroes, Fred Ross is right up there with Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day.

And Then La Paz

Nora and I spent our last year with the farmworkers in La Paz, California, headquarters of the UFW. Nora worked with Mary Jean and Leo Nieto in community relations. I served as director of the California Division of the National Farmworkers Ministry. The first of our three daughters was born while we lived in New York City. Because we were a family, we had the privilege of living in a trailer instead of the old hospital.

In August of 1978, we left the UFW and NFWM to return to the Midwest. We landed in Peoria, Illinois. Once again the Sandman family helped illuminate our path. Olga and Bob happened to live in Peoria at the time, and he served on the board of directors for the Friendship House. An ecumenical social services agency, Friendship House needed a community organizer/minister to work in a poor neighborhood on Peoria's near north side. Twenty-five years later, Nora and I still live in the same neighborhood.

The following year Olga arranged for Cesar to visit Peoria. Nora and I enjoyed the great fortune of having Cesar, in his only visit to Peoria, and Bishop Edward O'Rourke over to our house for dinner. Bishop O'Rourke had been one of the staunchest supporters of the UFW among the U. S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. After dinner, Cesar signed my 1968 UFW concert poster, which featured Peter, Paul, and Mary and Allen King at Carnegie Hall— *Cesar Chavez, 11/4/79.*

As I recall the past, I remember the many wonderful events and people that have shaped my life. To this day farmworkers still struggle to have a better way of life. One thing I learned in my time with the farmworkers and still hold dear is the ongoing spirit of "*Si Se Puede!*"

Viva Cesar Chavez! Viva UFW!