

Ellen M. Starbird 1975–1979

My name is Ellen Starbird. I joined the United Farm Workers union as a full-time volunteer when I was 17 in San Jose, California. My resumé says I worked for the farmworkers' union from 1975 to 1979. Initially, I worked on the boycott, soliciting support for the farmworkers among the city dwellers of San Jose. Then to Oakland for the signature gathering for the initiative to reinstate the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, the Farm Worker's Initiative in (1976).

Gathering signatures for the initiative consisted largely of standing in front of stores like Kmart or other high-volume locations where lots of people were shopping, and asking people to sign the petition to restore the Agricultural Labor Relations Act to effective administration by restoring the staff to their offices. (The governor at the time had basically sent all the enforcement agents their pink slips, rendering the law a piece of paper for agribusiness to ignore with all the impunity they generally used to ignore the Environmental Protection Act and the tax code. This clever ploy would later be duplicated with all civil rights agencies under future federal Republican administrations and also with the National Labor Relations Board under the Clinton Administration.)

After that, as I was particularly unimportant and therefore available for travel, I was sent to Oregon to work on then-Governor Brown's write-in effort to become president. There I worked with Marshall Ganz, a brilliant organizer now working at Harvard, who immediately surmised that the entire state of Oregon could be carried by organizing a single city to vote for Brown using a write-in campaign. Jerry Brown would later head up the Democratic Party's money collection in California and then become elected to the mayor of Oakland as an Independent. Brown came in third in that primary against Church, considered an Oregonian native son candidate, in the year that Jimmy Carter would be elected president.

I later worked at La Paz, then in Salinas, then the Coachella Valley, then the Calexico field offices, and back to Watsonville, just north of Salinas. I had a steamer trunk, about 3 feet high and 5 feet long. Everything I owned could fit into it during those years. The longest assignment I had was Coachella. Initially, only one grower had signed a contract, Lionel Steinberg of the David Freedman Ranch, a truly brilliant businessman who understood the efficacy of being the only grower selling grapes with a UFW logo. The union quickly decided to dedicate resources to signing the rest of his competition to a similar contract. One of the UFW's best and brightest, Eliseo Medina, now a vice president of the AFL-CIO, was given the task of heading up the Coachella campaign to organize grape workers.

But no one should think that we always agreed about everything among ourselves, or that even in an organization where by and large you do agree, there is never any need to debate and argue among friends. I think that we do a disservice to those who also hope to change the world—who seek to learn from us—to pretend we never disagree, like some television

sitcom. Sometimes you will find yourselves debating among yourselves and afraid and worrying about how to stay connected. A movement's fire and strength can come from such debates, and wise leaders broach such discord among the ranks.

A case in point in the Coachella grape campaign. During that campaign, Cesar Chavez accepted support from the ambassador to the U.S. to encourage Filipino farmworkers to vote for the UFW. These were men largely excluded from marriage or family. Due to racist immigration policy, this first wave of Filipino immigrants was men only. Many still had families at home in the Philippines during the reign of Fernando Marcos. Although he was called "president," Marcos was a tin despot appointed by the U.S. to run the Philippines, keeping the people in abject poverty. Marcos's immigration policy to the U.S., as with all of his resources, was often a matter of graft and nepotism. Many of those granted permission to leave the island were beholden to or afraid of the Marcos regime. Those allowed to leave the island were sometimes granted their exodus as a matter of patronage. Those who came to the U.S. were required by U.S. policy to leave their family behind.

Cesar prevailed upon the ambassador to visit the camps where the Filipinos lived. The ambassador, having visited the Coachella camps and urged the citizens of the Philippines to vote for the union, then invited Cesar to visit the Philippines (and not denounce the dictator publicly). Cesar was roundly criticized for this by some of us as I recall. Although the visit with the ambassador netted insignificant votes, I confess that I had no problem with Cesar getting the ambassador from the Philippines to give us a hand campaigning to win representation elections (the election where the union is selected or rejected by secret ballot of the workers). But I, among others on staff, gave Cesar a royal ration for visiting the Philippines as a guest of the dictator, during a staff meeting in La Paz. In the retrospective of the depravity of today's political leadership in America, it may seem incomprehensible that a union would have discord over such a tit-for-tat. But in our youth and ardor for social justice there was a real sense that justice should prevail in all our actions. Did not we have some grave moral obligation to the working people of the Philippines in the context of our mission to better the lives of working people?

The ambassador came to the UFW convention the next year. By then I was working on the lettuce strike. Rudy Reyes, ranch committee chairman, and one of the great leaders of the UFW in Coachella, took to the UFW convention floor at that union-wide convention. He thanked the ambassador for visiting the camps and supporting the farmworkers' right to free elections in the U.S. Then he paused. In a stadium-size convention hall there was sudden silence, as if the thousands assembled had simultaneously decided to hold their breath, Rudy then asked the ambassador when the Marcos regime would hold free elections in the Philippines, so that Filipino nationals like himself could enjoy democracy at home as well.

Thunderous spontaneous applause and tears of courage roared through the convention hall as virtually everyone leapt to their feet. The ambassador blushed and the power that a worker-run organization can afford a working man, placed in the capable hands of Rudy

Reyes, galvanized a significant political moment. Unlike the staff meeting in La Paz where there were no press, flashbulbs and media covering the convention recorded the moment when a despotic regime was humbled by a farmworker. Confronted by citizen Rudy Reyes, the ambassador did not answer the question—and the cheering would not subside even if he had wanted to answer. I don't recall the ambassador returning to subsequent conventions either, and talk of Cesar returning to Manila to lend legitimacy to Marcos stopped rather quickly as well.

I worked in the farmworker service center with Marcia Aronson and Olivia Nieto, a New York teacher and a social worker. We were idealistic, and the morning air before the dawn carried an excitement in the harvest season. Ruth Shy, the head of the Coachella office after Eliseo Medina returned to UFW headquarters in La Paz, was not a morning person. I recall her heartfelt morning entreaties in her Missouri drawl during trying times, "Lord, give me the strength. Don't need more of the faith, just give me the strength."

I was working at the Coachella field office when the Calexico strike began. I was living in a dinky apartment with Father Joe Tobin, Ruth Shy, Caren Jacobson, and Beth Gery. I don't believe Father Tobin ever explained to his diocese his living arrangements with so many women. Although he was scrupulous in his vows, he rather thought there would be greater simplicity all around if the church hierarchy was not bothered with that detail of his assignment. The heat was monstrous in the valley, but we made poor Joe wear the collar and that miserable black get-up on every occasion where the blessing of the church might lend itself nicely to *La Causa*. In this, as in all matters, Joe heroically obliged without the slightest hesitation and with no assertion on behalf of his own comfort.

Caren and Beth were registered nurses who ran the UFW clinic. A local doctor in Coachella was always trying to shut down the clinic to protect the monopoly he had enjoyed for years denying disability benefits to workers injured in the dangerous fields. Farm work then, as now, was one of the most dangerous occupations in existence, and the preferred medical provider of the farm corporations was, not surprisingly, the doctor who would not affirm an injury. No injury, no insurance payment as a work related disability. (California provides that a pittance must be paid to workers injured on the job by their employer's insurance carrier while they are too ill to work.) There was much jubilation in the farmworker clinic the day their not-so-friendly competitor for health care to the working poor was led away in handcuffs by the police. Seems he had put out a hit on his wife—purely for profit, of course.

There were others who came and went in the apartment in Coachella. Nancy Jarvis served in Coachella, as did Stephen Matchett. It was in this cockroach-infested apartment we called home that Ruth got the call notifying her that Rufino Contreras had been murdered by strikebreaking goons at Sikohn ranch in Calexico. We had been asked to fast and to prepare to stand as honor guard over his body during the hours between midnight and dawn while he lay in state for the funeral that Jessica Govea helped the family to prepare. I

would be reassigned to help the service center in Calexico. I didn't know it at the time, but I would not be assigned back to Coachella again.

At least one bus was filled with members from Coachella who joined us for the funeral. The international border between Mexico and the United States, one of the busiest in the world, was closed by the implacable press of humanity that was the tens of thousands of farmworkers and their supporters calling for a general strike. There was no labor at all that day to honor the martyred memory of Rufino Contreras.

The funeral itself was in "*El Hoyo*," which means "the hole." This was the name given the parking lot of the Calexico Employment Development Department. Here farmworkers gather before dawn in the hopes of being selected for a work crew. Normally as loud and tawdry and as sleazy as any border site between nations, "El Hoyo" had become hallowed ground in the sanctity of the farmworkers' mourning.

Contreras was the father of two small children. He had been gunned down by hired assassins in the tradition of American labor relations that have made us the toast of capitalism. Eighty-six bullets felled him in front of the Sikohn ranch. Young and handsome, death lay preposterous upon his vibrant figure, and the eerie fluorescent light and unfamiliar silence of the location added to the surreal quality of a life felled far too soon. An altar had been erected, and about six of us from Coachella were to stand at honor guard for the wee dark hours of epiphany that preceded the resurrection of the light. A wind began to howl before the dawn and kept the black UFW flags made for the occasion whipping. During the funeral oratory, a lone crop duster appeared in the moribund sky. The plane dipped and buzzed the mourners.

Now, there are few things more terrifying to a farmworker than the sight of a crop duster. Imagine the terror, if someone in authority forgets to tell the duster pilot that there are workers in the field to be dusted with insecticide that day. A foolish death of blinding painful convulsion can only be averted by running madly without dignity as fast as possible from the flight path. As the crop duster dipped as if to strafe the mourners with poison, my first thought was a blinding rage. It was a rage I felt more powerful than I could have imagined. Palatable as heat in its intensity, I felt myself bearing witness to the desecration of a sacred rite. To mock a funeral, a sacred religious service, what mortal would be so deprived? Then I read the name of the grower, which could be seen as it dipped painted on the wings of the plane: Sikohn. It was the name of the ranch where Rufino Contreras was shot.

The next realization I had was that I would be trampled dead in the panic of the densely packed crowd. But no one moved. With the implacability of the righteously wronged, each and every mourner stood his ground, unflinching as the crop duster dipped menacingly and then flew away.

The funeral procession marched silently and majestically, closing again the international border. The marchers trudged through the town inviting repentance from the local merchants who had invited the KKK and other unsavory people to come into their

community to assist in the breaking of the strike. The flags snapping in the wind on the march to the graveyard were the only sounds I remember on the march. Normally, farmworker marches have songs and chants, but this one did not—only the howling wind and the snap of fabric.

The bosses should have known their tactics of intimidation would not work then and there. They should have grabbed their pens and signed the contract that very day. But the strike continued stubbornly for another year before the employers surrendered to the workers their due. In the end, the farmworkers won.