

## Kate Johantgen 1975–1979

I knew little about the grape boycott, the United Farm Workers, or Cesar Chavez when I joined the union at the age of 19, in June of 1975, just after completing my sophomore year at Miami University. What I knew was through national magazines and references in current affairs textbooks. I knew no one in my hometown of Shelby, Ohio, who boycotted grapes. I knew no one in my college town who boycotted grapes. Nevertheless, I circled the blurb in my church bulletin to attend the showing of *Fighting for Our Lives* in May of 1975. I saw the movie. The speaker asked for volunteers that night. I signed up. It changed my life.

I spent the next four-and-a-half years dedicated to the UFW. I never had a leadership role while with the UFW. I was always on the periphery of major campaigns (if I was even that close). But I hope I made a difference. My years with the UFW made a significant difference in my life.

I first reported for duty in June of 1975 in Cincinnati. My world expanded exponentially. I learned about the plight of farmworkers, the history of the UFW, labor unions, agribusiness, the basic tenets of civil rights movements, political action, and living in an inner city. Allegedly, I became an “organizer,” getting others to boycott grapes, head lettuce, and Gallo wine, holding house meetings, asking for money, leafleting in front of grocery stores, working on fundraisers, and doing things I never imagined doing. I wasn’t comfortable with many of these duties and eventually became the office person, creating leaflets and newsletters. Mostly I enjoyed contributing to help change the world.

My fondest memories were of the other people. I learned much from my fellow boycotters and made some friends for life. I thoroughly enjoyed going out of town for regional meetings, including one in Chicago where I observed some of the UFW’s regional and national leadership for the first time. I was impressed. In August of 1975, I was a passenger in the bus caravan from Chicago to Fresno to attend a convention. We then went to La Paz for a couple of days and then back home in another caravan. What an experience, rubbing shoulders with farmworkers and the UFW leadership, listening to mariachis, eating Mexican food, being part of *La Causa*! I was hooked. I worked on and off again until I graduated from college in May of 1977.

I was then assigned to work in Boston, where I became the office person. My main memories of Boston are the two huge blizzards that the city endured in early 1978. I also remember the poignant meal at the home of Nan Freeman’s parents. I believe the occasion was the anniversary of Nan’s death. Nan was the UFW’s first martyr. I can’t recall what the boycotting campaigns were during those days in Boston. Apparently, La Paz didn’t think much of our boycotting campaigns either and closed all of the boycott offices in the spring of 1978. We drove cross-country again and arrived in La Paz in May of 1978.

Generally, my fellow boycotters and I in Cincinnati (1975-76) and in Boston (1977-78) were white, in our 20s, from middle-class families, and had some college education. We had little firsthand knowledge of farm work or farmworkers, and minimal knowledge of Spanish. But we were committed and wanted to serve.

I liked many aspects of La Paz. I liked the warmer climate, though the winter of 1978-79 was the coldest of my life. I had always lived in places (Ohio and Massachusetts) that had central heating. The electric heater in the hallway of the basement of the hospital (the dormitory setting in La Paz) did not keep me very warm, but I spent many an evening huddled beside it. I bought a portable space heater, but it blew a fuse each time I plugged it in.

I made many friends there. I mostly hung out with other single people. I very much enjoyed our discussions. I never watched TV while there. I enjoyed the weekend trips to Bakersfield, where we frequently went to the movies, learning how to pay for one movie and sneak in to see a second. But sometimes finding a ride into Bakersfield was a struggle. The isolation of La Paz became difficult. I sometimes craved talking about “anything but the union.” I wanted to “get a life.” I wanted access to transportation (public bus or car) to be able to get away. I made a promise to myself when I left that I would always live on a bus line. I have. I always want my “escape route.”

I was assigned to be the secretary to the house counsel. I learned how to type legal documents. My typing was poor and La Paz had to buy correction fluid by the barrel for me. I longed for an IBM Selectric typewriter that allowed you to easily make corrections. There were Wang word processors in La Paz, but I never used them. The only copier was in the print shop—and the copies were on slick gray paper. I worked with Marco, and he would take me to the Kern County Law Library to do legal research. I attended a civil litigation class at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles during the fall of 1978. I think I enjoyed the escape from La Paz more than the class. I was then asked to join the UFW’s paralegal class in the spring of 1979. The paralegal class and others moved to Salinas a few months later to take over for the “old” legal department. What huge shoes to fill. I soon learned that I did not care much for paralegal work. You need patience to work in a legal setting; I wanted immediate gratification. In hindsight, I wish I had an administrative job in the legal department.

I decided to leave the UFW during that time. It was my decision. I was unhappy. I did not like my work. I was homesick for my family in Ohio. It was a difficult decision but the right one. I left in December of 1979.

### Some Memories of La Paz

Lupe was a single mom from East Los Angeles, living in the hospital with her four-year-old daughter, Rosalia. Lupe was not very welcoming to me and the other “boycotters” who joined her kitchen in the hospital. I think she had had only negative experiences with white

people until then. Lupe and I had little in common. But after a while, we decided that the other was OK. And then we became friends. Never best friends, but friends. After a few months, she told me that I was the “first white friend” she ever had. I could have told her that she was my “first Hispanic friend.” Around that time, we both attended an impromptu party/dance that happened in the basement of the hospital, dancing to records. That evening Lupe told me I was the best white dancer she had ever seen. To this day, I consider her comments to be some of the highest compliments I’ve ever received. (Upon further recollection, I wonder if she was making fun of me when she was talking about my dancing! I choose to think she meant it truthfully.)

I also recall Paco (a farmworker), his wife, and six-year-old daughter moving into the hospital and joining our kitchen. I believe many farmworker families arrived in La Paz about that time. Paco’s English was about as good as my Spanish (poor). His wife and daughter spoke no English. But Paco’s wife and I became friends and spoke to each other by pointing to objects in the kitchen and saying them in our native language. The daughter started school at that time and we were amazed how quickly she learned English. (I remembered that experience when I volunteered with an English as a Second Language program a few years ago.) Paco and family moved into a trailer after a few weeks, and I missed our interactions.

I believe there were two other “schools” in session while I was attending the paralegal school in the North Unit of La Paz. A graduation date was set, and it was decided that all graduates would dress similarly in white muslin fabric—a shirt for the men and a dress for the women. All would be hand-sewn. I had a sewing machine and we set up our “sweat shop” in the vegetarian kitchen in the hospital. Rosie, with her fancy machine, joined us. We, the women graduates and wives of the male graduates, spent hours cutting material and sewing the shirts and dresses. I stitched for many and also showed others how to use my machine. We worked until the last minute. To my surprise and delight, many of the wives gave me small gifts to thank me for helping them. The gifts were not necessary, but I still have them, after 25 years.

I have been reading the Farmworker Listserv for the last six months prior to writing this essay. I’ve remembered a lot. Learned a lot. I have recently collected some missing pieces to the puzzle of life in La Paz and the union.

In hindsight, I was in La Paz at some controversial times (1978-1979). I experienced the Game and voluntarily chose not to attend after a few weeks. I was part of the transition of the legal department from Salinas to La Paz.

At age 24, I realized the importance of *not* worshipping your heroes. They are human. They make mistakes. They have warts. They can hurt others, deeply.

I learned that it is important to have a separation from those you work with and those you live with. We lived and worked together for economic reasons, but if you have a choice ...

I learned that people who join together for good and noble purposes can have nasty divisions and fights. I came to believe that it is hard to create a utopia even amongst the best-intentioned, altruistic people.

I've no regrets that I gave four-and-a-half years to the United Farm Workers. I received more than I gave. I learned a tremendous amount. I have many great memories. I tried to do what was asked of me. I tried not to complain. I felt privileged to serve.

In January 1980, I moved to Cincinnati and have been here since. I've remained single, no kids. I've done a lot of volunteer work. I don't volunteer often for political work, but when I do, I receive compliments for my ability to work a phone bank or do canvassing. The UFW taught me well. Generally, I've worked in corporate America as an administrative assistant.

In 1987 I returned to California to attend a UFW gathering at Forty Acres. I was disappointed in my homecoming that day because I did not see many people I knew. I sat there thinking how different my life had become in the eight years since I left. I wondered if I had contributed anything at all to the United Farm Workers during the years I served.

I then saw Lupe and her husband, Chano. Lupe and Chano had met in La Paz, married, and left the union a few years before. We sat and caught up with each others' lives. I told them of my recent ruminations, wondering what I had contributed. I'll always remember their response. They told me that I had supported the farmworkers. That I was a friend. That I cared. That I worked hard and tried to do what was asked of me. They told me that my work had mattered to the farmworkers.

Thank you, Lupe and Chano, for letting me know that I made a difference.

Thank you, United Farm Workers, for giving me the opportunity to serve.