

Beth Gery 1975–1980

I became involved with the United Farm Workers Union in April of 1975. I was a senior in college at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, majoring in nursing. I attended a weekend conference at George Washington University organized by Gene Lee, Tom Kavet and Pete Kuchezny. Called the Student Mobilization Conference, it was geared to organize students behind the grape, lettuce, and Gallo wine boycotts.

It was an electrifying experience for me. Students came from all over the country, as far away as Denver and Ann Arbor, Michigan. The entire executive board of the UFW addressed the conference. It was a time in my life when I was starting to awaken politically. The energy and vision of what Cesar articulated was inspiring.

I returned to Baltimore after the conference and became involved with the Baltimore boycott office, which was directed by John Proctor, mainly through joining picket lines in front of liquor stores.

Upon graduating from college in May of 1975, I returned home to Silver Spring, Maryland, where I contacted the Washington, D.C. boycott office to resume my involvement. Gilbert and Esther Padilla had been in charge of the D.C. office but had recently returned to California. The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act had just been signed by Governor Jerry Brown and the focus was shifting from the cities to organizing in the fields. Gene Lee had taken over as director of the D.C. office.

I took the state nursing board exam that summer, the results of which would come in three months. I decided to join the D.C. boycott staff for those three months and began community organizing for the boycott in Prince George's County—a suburban area outside Washington. (I left the union five years later.)

In January of 1976, I was assigned to the union headquarters at La Paz, to work as the medical liaison between the community of about 125 people and the medical staff at the Delano clinic. During that time in La Paz, I also worked in the mailroom with Mona Chacon and Sister Jeannine.

During that year in La Paz, there were several campaigns to which the staff was sent. In April of 1976, I was assigned to the initiative campaign in Oakland, working to qualify the union's proposal for the ballot. In one month, enough signatures were collected to qualify for the ballot—a record in California.

The union proposal was to have guaranteed funding for the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which had been established under the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. However, funding for the board had become political fodder for the growers in their efforts to subvert the law.

After the initiative campaign, I returned to La Paz. In September of 1976, I was assigned to work with Marshall Ganz in the Proposition 14 campaign headquarters in Los Angeles. I worked as a media liaison and coordinated the TV and radio ads. After that campaign, which ended in defeat, I again returned to La Paz.

That was a difficult time for the union, and a difficult time to be in La Paz. But the community had become home for me, and it was good to be back with people who had become such close friends. It felt like family.

In April of 1977, I was transferred to the clinic in Coachella, and, with Caren Jacobson, helped run the Coachella clinic. It was a truly rewarding time for me personally—watching the clinic grow and becoming more involved in the field office activities. The community of workers in the Coachella Valley were devoted and determined, and the staff of the clinic and field office had the good fortune of getting to know them. Many wonderful friendships developed.

I lived in the Mecca Vineyards apartments (an apartment complex in Indio) with Ruth Shy, Caren Jacobson, Joe Tobin, Ellen Starbird, and Jane Tobin. The clinic staff also included Sister Noreen Sullivan and Kirsten Thompson.

I left the union in May of 1980, prompted by the decision to apply to medical school. For the previous three years, Caren and I had spent a lot of energy trying to find a doctor who would work with us and cover our work legally with their license. As a result of that constant search for a doctor to join us, we both decided to go to medical school.

We were both accepted to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. After graduation in 1987, I moved to New York City to do my residency in psychiatry, after which I worked with HIV/AIDS patients for the next 10 years. I continue to do that work, in addition to general psychiatry.

When Cesar died in 1993, I went to Delano to his funeral. It was an odd time—mourning the sudden loss of a great man and a celebration of all he had done. Many people, staff and workers, came to the funeral. It was a family reunion.

I still live in New York City, am married to Richard, an architect and a native New Yorker, and have a one-year-old daughter, Alice.

My experience with the UFW was a life-changing experience. It played a significant role in defining the path I would take in life. It informed my politics and my sense of what is possible. I look back on each chapter—the D.C. boycott, my time in La Paz, the three years in Coachella—with enormous affection. It was a time for me of great personal challenge and growth, both individually and professionally. It was my first experience of

the exhilaration of working for something with a sense of passion and determination and pride. It had a profound effect on me.

Another significant part of those times were the friendships that I formed—both with other staff members and with some of the workers in Coachella. Many of us came from vastly different ethnic, social, political, or religious backgrounds. But we were all driven by a strong belief in what Cesar and the UFW stood for, and it was a powerful foundation on which to build relationships. Some of those friendships I have maintained, and many I have lost track of. But, 24 years later, I think of them often. I talk frequently about those years.

There is a framed copy of the 1973 Boycott Safeway poster of Cesar, with his clenched fist raised high, hanging in a prominent location in our living room. My time with the union is an indelible part of me.

I applaud and thank LeRoy Chatfield for organizing this documentation project.