

## Jean Eilers 1976–1981

It was 1972, post-Vatican II. As religious women, we had great discussions of what it really meant to have a “preferential disposition to the poor.” There was also the discussion of charity versus justice. I lived in a convent in Pasadena, California, and taught at Mayfield High School, a private Catholic school, whose families were people of means. So one day, after reading an article in the newspaper about a UFW volunteer, four of us, Sisters of the Holy Child, thought we should put some action into our words. After some challenges, we found people at the AME Church in Los Angeles. They were farmworkers from the Coachella Valley. The church was their sleeping quarters as well as base of operation. We found someone “in charge” and they suggested that we come back at 6:30 a.m. They had a campaign going to collect letters written to Senator Dole, requesting that the farmworkers *not* be put under the NLRA.

So we went home and prepared to rise early. The next day we punctually arrived at 6:30 a.m. There was going to be breakfast served shortly, which would be followed by a meeting to orient all to the tasks for the day. All was in both English and Spanish. We ate, cleared dishes, cleaned up, attended the meeting, and learned that we would be sent out in teams of about five or six to various shopping malls around Los Angeles. The four of us were divided up into different groups and off we went. My group arrived at the mall probably about 8:30 a.m. I had no idea of where I was other than it was a mall and the street said Atlantic. I also had no idea of where the other sisters might be.

We were armed with a clipboard, pen, and letters—hand-written—asking Senator Dole not to include the farmworkers in the NLRA. Did I understand what this all meant? Only that it was clear that the law would work against the farmworkers, outlawing their right to boycott—the only way they had achieved union rights in the grape industry. Not speaking Spanish, I couldn’t talk with the farmworkers.

There was an energetic young guy—somewhat disheveled in appearance—who was directing us. We approached customers and asked them to help the farmworkers and sign this letter to Senator Dole. People, in what I learned was Alhambra, were receptive. Many signed. About noon, our leader called us together and brought out the sandwiches for lunch. Teaching was never this hard and never made you this hungry and tired. After a short half hour, we were back collecting signatures. The afternoon wore on forever. My words to the customers became more and more slurred as exhaustion set in. But the farmworkers never seemed to fail, and you would muster yourself to approach one more customer. Somehow 5 p.m. came round. Our leader thought that we were doing so well, however, that we should keep working until 6 p.m., and besides, we weren’t all that far from the church.

I managed to stay awake, on my feet, until we were signaled that it was time to go! Welcome relief. We got in the car and returned to the church.

At the church, we needed to fold all the letters we had written and put them in envelopes. The envelopes needed addressing. The envelopes needed stamps. We did these chores. Then I think we had a meeting, then it was time to eat. And please don't go yet—we need to prepare for tomorrow. The letters needed to be written. There was always one more thing that needed to be done. At 10 p.m., we managed to catch each other's eyes, half lidded, and said that we really, really needed to go. Too tired to talk about the experience then, now 31 years later, whenever we see each other, it is a vivid shared experience. A long time later I learned that Jessica Govea and Ruth Shy were the organizers of that project—people I got to know well from working directly for the UFW.

This initial experience was a kind of paradigm for my farmworker experiences. These farmworkers wanted to change their unfair working conditions. They would do whatever it took and they always appreciated those who came to help. While the Senator Dole letters were our first experience, in the following year, with Fred Ross, Jr. and Bob Purcell as our organizers, we participated in many ways to help defeat Proposition 22. We collected bottles for money. We held meetings and invited other religious women. We were human billboards in Santa Monica and other streets.

In 1973, all of my colleagues from the first day, plus other members of my religious order, went to jail in Fresno to protest the unfair injunctions against the farmworkers. Having taken care of some duty I had, I went to Fresno to join my colleagues a few days later. I remember well standing on the picket line at 7 a.m., seeing the white bus arrive and asking myself if I was ready to go to jail. But then the white bus drove away and I had to ask myself if I was ready to stand in the hot sun all day! The jail was determined to be too full to make any more arrests. So for the next two weeks I shared in the hunger strike, sitting on the steps of the courthouse. Sister Pearl McGivney would give me tasks to do. One job was to go visit the imprisoned and keep their spirits up. It would be very hard on the farmworkers if they saw the supporters bailing out. There had never been an expectation that it would last two weeks. Whatever commitments or duties, they took second priority. This unfairness and power held by the growers had to be challenged. As my compatriots love to remind me—they were the ones doing the cheering up. When they were finally released, we drove down the valley and arrived in Delano. Juan de la Cruz had been killed on the picket line. We joined the funeral march for Juan de la Cruz.

In 1974, 1975, and 1976, there were boycotts of Safeway—Gallo wine—to challenge the right to solicit signatures. There were delegations to the governor about a new law for farmworkers to organize. There were religious order meetings, getting someone to make presentations about the farmworker plight and the solutions. Often, some request to organize something would start with the phone ringing. It would be Fred Ross, Sr. “We have this crisis. Can you ... ?”

By 1976, it was clear to me that I did not want to be teaching in a school where it was hard to have an audience who would comprehend what justice required. So with the order's blessing and through the Farm Worker Ministry and Chris Hartmire, four of us Sisters of

the Holy Child signed up to work with the United Farm Workers full time. We were assigned to Delano—three to the clinic and I to the field office as a paralegal. The next five years were an amazing experience. First in Delano, then Coachella, then San Ysidro, then at the headquarters in La Paz until 1981, when I left in June.

*Si se puede!* It was always built on this amazing inspiration of hope. Workers had the ability to change the abuse and unfairness. There were enough good people willing to work hard with them to make this a reality.