

## Rosemary Cooperrider 1977–1979

Verne and I decided when he retired in 1977 that working for the UFW under the auspices of the National Farm Worker Ministry was what we both wanted. Our first assignment was to go to Salinas and wait for an expected opening at the UFW clinic there, but a decision was made to close the clinic, so we moved to La Paz—the farmworkers' name for their national headquarters, in Keene between Bakersfield and Tehachapi. We had locked up our valuables and rented our Palo Alto house to a family on sabbatical from Dartmouth University. The father was taking classes at Stanford Medical School and the mother was a soloist with the San Francisco Symphony, and they had two children. They took excellent care of our house for the year they were there and left it cleaner than they had found it. The second year we had student renters from Stanford's medical school and they made a mess of the place. So we had bit of clearing and cleaning when we got home.

Originally the UFW office was in a little pink house in Delano. They had a big hall on Forty Acres and built Agbayani Village to house elderly Filipino farmworkers and others. Cesar had made a promise to accommodate these workers when the Mexican UFWOC and the Filipino unions merged several years before to become the UFW, AFL-CIO. In 1970 a Hollywood movie producer, supporter of the UFW, made a down payment on an old Kern County tuberculosis sanitarium that had been on the market for 14 years. It had several buildings on the 300-plus-acre tract. Helen Chavez, Cesar's wife, refused to move to La Paz from Delano for a long time because as a child she had been a patient at the sanitarium. The UFW officially moved the headquarters to La Paz about 1972.

One of the three largest buildings was converted into an office building, one into living quarters for volunteers, and the third was used for large events. There were several old house trailers and several small wooden houses, which housed mainly families. We lived in one room in the building used for living quarters that was located just behind the office building. We slept and lived in one small room and cooked in a cooperative kitchen where anywhere from two to 20 of us cooked and ate. Our kitchen had once been the x-ray room for the hospital. There were four groups living cooperatively in the building, each having a kitchen but using coed bathrooms and shower rooms (a bit hard to get used to). We took turns shopping in Bakersfield and cooking in the kitchen, and also took turns cleaning the building, including the bathrooms. One of the kitchens used by only men was supervised by the resident priest, Ken Irrgang. They didn't do their job of bathroom and shower cleaning. I got very angry at this situation and wrote a protest letter to Cesar with a copy to the "kitchen." The cleaning was done pronto!

The population at La Paz varied in number, depending on the union's current campaign. One time, practically the whole community left for cities all over the U.S. and Canada to support the lettuce boycott campaign. They left with just a bus ticket and phone numbers of supporters who might help them.

Many of the events during those two years were organized under crisis conditions with little advance warning. We always came through, however. We all went to Los Angeles and did voter registration one time. We set up ironing boards in shopping malls for people to sign their registration forms.

The large building at the other end of the property was the scene of parties, dances, banquets, and at least one wedding we attended, and the famous "Graduation Exercise." In a small house about a block away from the office building Cesar and Helen lived with their two German shepherd dogs (Huelga and Boycott), which Cesar had raised as guard dogs. They were kept behind a high wire fence.

The La Paz UFW Headquarters is located between Highway 58 and the combined Southern Pacific–Santa Fe railroad tracks. The grade up the Tehachapi Pass is so steep that up to a dozen locomotives are used on the trains of over 100 cars, and their noise, combined with big trucks storming up the freeway, made a lot of noise at times. The Tehachapi Loop is only a couple of miles up the pass where a tunnel makes a complete loop inside the mountain, so the locomotives up front cross over the end cars with more than 70 feet of vertical separation. So if you sit on the hill and watch, you can see both the front and end cars of the train at once, and if you're lucky, two trains going both ways curling around in the mountain. It is a "Seventh Wonder of the World." Anytime we had community meetings, the trains and trucks would drown out the speakers. This usually happened several times during the meeting, so we would have to wait. Our community meetings took place usually on Friday afternoons. We were updated on happenings of the previous week and sometimes had an interesting guest. One of them was Chuck Dederich. Cesar had been associated with him in CO days. Unfortunately, he had become the leader of the Synanon cult. (That cult had put a rattlesnake in the mailbox of the attorney of a former member suing the cult.) Fairly often, Cesar would be on the phone when the meeting was to start so Verne would entertain folks playing piano jazz. You can bet those mostly young folks loved it. We were privileged to help ourselves in the wonderful vegetable garden maintained by one of the oldest men in the community, a retired Mexican farmworker. He entertained us with some traditional dances, Wolf Dance, Day of the Dead, with a colorful mask.

Cesar told us on one occasion in our kitchen about the five times his life had been threatened. We learned about one of them while we were there. Because information was received from the FBI that a price of \$5000 had been placed on Cesar's head by someone in Arizona, the Delancey Street organization (SF group that worked to rehabilitate drug and other offenders) was enlisted to guard La Paz. Some of them sat up on the hill and all of us took turns doing guard duty at night at the guard station located at the entrance to La Paz. I spent shifts about midnight walking through the halls of the office building and the building we lived in to make sure nothing unusual was happening. It was scary. There was no possible way the property could be guarded, with railroad tracks on one side and a freeway on the west side, and the small town of Keene consisted only of a gas station and small market, a post office, and a few little houses.

After we first got to La Paz, Chris Hartmire encouraged all of us to participate in “The Game.” After a couple of times I refused to participate. There was a scheme to blame a person in your group for something real or imagined that another person in the group had done. Then everyone would join in criticizing that person. We later found out this was a way Cesar had of checking up on what was going on. He had a “stooge” in each group who reported back to him.

One time when Cesar was off on a trip, he spent time with the leader of the Sylva Mind Control cult, and when he came back he told us how he could see “auras” around people’s heads. Because of the involvement of our son, Keith, in a destructive cult (Moonies), we didn’t think much of the Sylva Mind Control group.

Most of the folks in the community were volunteers. They were paid \$10 a week plus room and board, which was enhanced by food stamps and the privilege of using wonderful vegetables from the community garden (we were on a similar stipend paid by the NFWM but returned it to them as a donation). Cesar had the philosophy that anyone organizing workers must not live any more lavishly than those they were organizing. He died without a penny. When we were at La Paz, several of the legal staff quit. They had children and wanted to see to it that they could afford to send them to college. The one lawyer remaining was Marcos Camacho, who is now the chief lawyer for the UFW. Several young people passed the California bar exams by learning on the job. You don’t have to go to law school to be a lawyer in California. Mary Mecartney and Dolores Huerta’s son are now on the UFW legal staff. A recent visit to La Paz in December of 2000 for the NFWM board meeting revealed that these income restrictions have been changed, and staff are earning salaries more like other union employees. The union is now able to pay some retirement and health benefits to the older retired farmworkers. The union has built some beautiful housing for these workers in several areas in Southern California.

Verne was placed in charge of the word management department, responsible for buying the UFW’s first word processing computer to produce contracts printed in English and Spanish per regulations of the new California Agricultural Labor Relations Act. When we arrived, contracts were taking up to three years to be delivered to the members, just at the time for contract renewal. By the time we left, the contracts were produced ready for the farmworkers’ use in about a month. The first computer had huge disks that had to be kept in a room under controlled temperature and humidity. We had to back up our work every night. During a thunderstorm everything had to be turned off to keep the information from being lost on the disks. We worked nine hours a day for five days, and on the sixth day, Saturday, we got off an hour early.

I spent four hours a day in the morning typing Spanish into the computer. In the afternoon I compared the language of an older contract (English) to one that had just been signed. The new pacts were then turned over to three translators so those of us running the computer could insert the new Spanish language. I got so I could type the Spanish very

fast, about 90 words per minute. One day Cesar stood behind my chair watching me. He said, "I didn't know you could type so fast," and of course I couldn't when he or anyone else was watching me. The greatest difficulty for those translating English to Spanish was for the tools and machines used in agriculture. Many were not in any dictionaries. The farmworkers used the word "fiel" for field instead of *campo*. They had heard their employers say "field."

On weekends we sometimes left La Paz to go camping, usually at Red Rock Canyon State Park or occasionally to visit our daughter Kristi and husband in Fresno. Several times we took some volunteer staff camping with us. Great fun!

One winter was eventful. The usually placid creek running through the property flooded, so it was necessary to get into the property by using the high-wheeled fire engine we kept ready. On one occasion we forded the stream with our car, hoping it wouldn't bottom out as we crossed the deepest part. Another time a thunderstorm was so close that lightning struck a chicken house located just across the creek from La Paz. Our Christmas tree was a "tumbleweed."

After we left in November of 1979, the legal department moved from Delano to La Paz into the large building on the west end of the property where the parties took place. Sadly, the creek flooded and ruined the files in the basement. Before we left La Paz, Verne researched some large printing equipment for Cesar and they built a new corrugated steel building that they used for a print shop and also the legal department after the flood. It now houses the legal department (2000). In 1997 we volunteered for two weeks in La Paz where we cleaned up the flooded mess in the west end building and did some grower company research for them.

When we arrived at La Paz, we promised to stay at least a year and leave it open-ended whether we'd stay longer. There were a lot of stories when we arrived at La Paz of volunteers being fired without any redress, and it happened while we were there, and afterward we decided to leave after two years. We went back to Palo Alto and fixed up our house and sold it and moved to Oregon. There were more firings after we left. While in La Paz I took two classes in pottery and Verne in solar heating at Bakersfield Community College. We had some money to invest and decided to buy a farm for Bob to farm. We flew up to McMinnville, where they found 100 acres and a farmhouse for us to live in and a spot for Verne to build a solar house. Before we left Palo Alto we went to Mexico, joined Karen Schlossman (whom we had met on the UFW staff) in Mexico City. We initially had great difficulty connecting with Karen. We had the name of the street where she was staying but found there were 13 streets with the same name. A miracle we got together! From Mexico City we drove on the Independencia Route through San Miguel Allende—a wonderful trip.

Mass at La Paz was held every Sunday morning. Ken Irrgang presided. Verne played piano. I used to marvel how quiet the little Hispanic kids sat during the service, while one of the little Anglo kids used to run around the room and crawl under the communion table.

One of the scary things that happened we didn't witness. One of Cesar's bodyguards had a room next to ours. One night he returned after guarding Cesar in the middle of the night and, according to Lupe, had a gun and was planning to kill himself. She wrestled the gun away from him.

One of the men on staff who always handled the equipment for simultaneous translation going on at a meeting and other audio equipment lived previously at the Catholic order house in Sheridan, Oregon before the property was sold to the Church of Scientology. He later came to visit us after we moved to Oregon.

At least one of the Latino farmworker women was very suspicious of these Anglos, including Verne and me, and only as we were leaving did she tell us she had misjudged us. We weren't sure that Cesar trusted us either. He fired an awful lot of staffers during those two years. One of the men who left or was fired, Gilbert Padilla, told us we were on a list to be fired eventually. This was hard to take when so many gave so freely to the union to be treated this way. We'll never forget his firing of Chris Hartmire, former executive director of NFWM, after the years and years he'd given to the union. Several other people like ourselves assigned to work for the UFW were paid by NFWM the standard \$10 a week plus room and board augmented by food stamps, except those with families. They received more.

There was a scheme perpetrated by the growers to get three farmworker organizers arrested in Salinas during the lettuce field strike. This was during the gas shortage period in the 1970s. People were carrying a can of gas in their car in case they ran out. These three guys supposedly were carrying material to make a bomb. They had a can and a rag in their trunk. A team of us were sent to Watsonville from La Paz to do scientific random sampling managed by a professional company. The hope was to get "a change of venue" because it was not possible to get a fair trial for these three in hostile Salinas and Monterey County. We spent a whole week calling people, to no avail. The judge ruled against "a change of venue." The three had to serve 90 days in jail. One of them is married to Marion Steeg, who was a negotiator for the UFW. Chava Bustamente has gone on to successfully organizing janitors in SIEU. Marion is an organizer for the public employers union.

This was a wonderful chapter of our lives. We had a chance like few others have had to see this wonderful union from the inside—and got to know Cesar personally. One of the wonderful benefits has been that innumerable number of young people were trained to do union organizing and have gone on to do significant organizing for other unions. Guadalupe Gamboa is now the president of the UFW of Washington state. Cipriano Ferrel was the first president of PCUN. Jim Drake organized woodcutters in the South, etc.

It is sad to visit Cesar's grave and realize he is gone. He is buried in the rose garden that Verne and I tended while we lived at La Paz. The union got special permission to bury him there. It is a humble grave outlined with cedar shakes and a cross at the head with a rosary hanging on it. In front of it is a little blue glass with a candle inside. On December 4, 2000, at the NFWM board meeting we lit candles (only a few because the wind was blowing so hard). We had a ceremony in which we dedicated ourselves to continue to work for farmworker justice. We visited his office, left just the way he left it. Hanging on a shelf along with his books is an infamous short-handled hoe outlawed about the time we lived in Palo Alto. This connects my story about the farmworker ministry to my father as I am sure he must have used this torturous instrument that supposedly told the grower that his workers were working. I'm sure that using the hoe made my father's legs ache to his dying day. I'm thankful again and again for the courage and dedication of the farmworkers who have given their lives that we might eat the fruit of their labor every day of our lives.