

Encinas/Esparza Family 1971-1974

The following essays were written by members of the Encinas/Esparza family – Rachel Encinas, Helen Esparza, Bonnie Esparza and Victoria Encinas. The family lived at the United Farm Worker headquarters – La Paz – in Keene, CA.

Rachel Encinas

My husband, Bill Sr., and I, together with our children, Bill Jr., Elaine, Helen and Yvonne, joined the United Farm Workers Union at Cesar's request and invitation in November, 1971. We moved to La Paz to begin our work in the struggle for the rights and justice for farmworkers. The following year our child, Victoria, was born.

I worked at La Paz with Helen Chavez at the Farm Workers Credit Union. It was a good experience and fun working with her. She is a great First Lady.

My husband worked in a few of the union departments, went on the various campaigns that came up including the farm strikes in Coachella, Arvin and Lamont. Bill was a true huelgista at heart and was so proud to be part of the greatest movement in this country. He always said that his work with the union was the most meaningful and gratifying work he had ever done. He was proud to work for – and with – Cesar Chavez, and so was I.

My whole family has benefited from our experience in the union. I will always treasure the memories.

Helen Esparza

My parents are Bill and Rachel Encinas, and my siblings are Bill Jr., Elaine, Yvonne and Victoria. This is my account of growing up in La Paz:

In 1971, our family settled into our new home, the South Unit of the old tuberculosis hospital in La Paz. Our mission: to dedicate five years of our lives to the UFW attempting to drastically change and forever alter the plight of the farmworkers in California.

We rode a school bus 10 miles into Tehachapi to attend school. I recall receiving \$75 for new school clothes and also wearing donated clothing. I had an after-school job. My supervisor was Jessica Govea who was in charge of the Nan Freeman Fund. I typed “thank you” letters for donations received, for which I was paid \$5 a week. In the evenings, I enjoyed the many community dinners and fiestas, movie nights, and celebrity supporters visiting our community and speaking. On the weekends, we attended marches and rallies for the legislative propositions we were fighting for. In the summer, we were on

the picket lines at 5:00 AM in Arvin, Lamont or Coachella. One time, I was handcuffed and thrown in the back seat of a patrol car of the Kern County Sheriff's Department when a UFW picket line took a turn for the worse.

When the national boycott of grapes was called, our family drove 1,500 miles to do our part under the leadership of Eliseo Medina in Cleveland, Ohio. I was 14-years-old. On weekends I held HUELGA! signs and boycotted Fazio stores in the harsh Cleveland winter. The national boycott was a success and we returned home to La Paz.

I recall my many conversations with Cesar, seeing him practice his yoga at home, attending the UFW convention and celebrating with him. I remember his daughter, Liz and I, taking a pot of hot Chamomile tea to him at his office.

To sum up the entire experience, I made life-long friends and have memories that I wouldn't trade for the world. My father, Bill, is now gone, as is Cesar. I hope they knew what a powerful impact they had on so many lives, young and old.

I am now 46-years-old, a real estate agent and legal secretary, and have a daughter, Jessika, who is a film student at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

Yvonne Rizzo aka Bonnie Esparza

I live in Whittier, California with my husband, Steve, our two teenage sons, Thomas and James, and our dog "Girl". I was born and raised in Los Angeles County.

I am a union carpenter by trade, and a member of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, The South West Regional Council of Carpenters and Carpenter's Local Union 630, Long Beach, CA since 1979.

Volunteer work has become a big part of my life in the last five years. I have become more active in the carpenters union. From 2002 – 2005 I was a board member of The Southern California Sisters in the Brotherhood, a volunteer women's committee. I organized the purchase for a table at The Fifth Annual Educating the Heart Dinner for our women's committee members. I think it is very important that our unions respect and support each other. I also started tutoring three years ago for The Santa Fe Springs Library Literacy Services. I am a volunteer adult reading tutor and this service is free to the community residents, children and adults. It's a great community service that I enjoy doing.

I was 10 years old when we moved to La Paz in 1971, but I "grew up" real fast. Cesar Chavez was our neighbor, my best friend's father, a friend to me, and one of the greatest union labor leaders I have had the honor and the pleasure to know. For the 3 ½ years we were with the farmworker movement I lived in La Paz and in Cleveland, Ohio for one of those years on the boycott.

I was at an age where everything was a learning experience, which I did not always realize then, but I do now. Cesar made a huge impact on my life just by being himself. He had the patience and respect for children and adults alike, he had the ability to treat the kids with a kind but confident attitude that he passed onto us. I learned how to work, drive a car, work on political campaigns, understand the importance of unions, and believe in a cause worth fighting for. I can see the effect the farmworker movement has had in my life today through my belief in volunteer work and unions. I am proud to be a union member and that fact of life started when I was 10 years old.

I met a lot of great people and had many friends in La Paz that I will never forget. I think Cesar knew that he was teaching us all to be better people along any road we traveled.

Victoria Encinas

I was a big surprise to my parents when I came along on November 9, 1972 while they were living in La Paz. My sisters and brother were at least 12 to 18 years older than me and Rachel and Bill had no plans for a baby! I was born just after Election Day of that year and it so happened that a bad piece of anti-farmworker legislation (Proposition 22) had been overturned. People were very happy and were celebrating.

It was in the middle of these celebrations that my mother went into labor and my brother Billy had to take her to a hospital in Delano! I was un-named for three days and there was an announcement that "Julana de Tal" was born on November 9. One of the non-Spanish speaking nuns told my father that she thought that was such a pretty name! It was finally decided to name me Victoria after that very happy victory on Election Day of 1972. When I first heard that story, I was so proud and I still am.

I have been told that I was in picket lines and police cars all over the state and country before I was 2 years old! I only wish that I could remember everything back that far, but I know that the spirit of activism was passed along to me. During various peace rallies in college, I was one of the few people I knew whose parents would have actually been proud if I were arrested for standing up for what I believed in.

I cherish the stories and pictures from that time. They make me feel connected to my family's past and I remember many of the stories as if they were my own.