

Kathy Jenkins
Minneapolis boycott, Proposition 14 campaign (South Harbor, LA), Calexico
Service Center, 1976-77

Dedicated to some of the farm workers who changed my life: Felicitas Ruelas, Antonio Hernandez, La Familia Hostiguin, Maria Zamora, and Anastasio Tello, and especially to Debbie and Judy.

At the age of 19, having been radicalized by a semester in Venezuela (where I became aware of the injustices of Latin America in the 70's) I was a Chicano Studies major at the University of Minnesota, working as an intern with the Governor's Office of Migrant Affairs. Our office had sponsored a conference of all the Upper Midwest federal migrant grantees, and my job was to serve coffee, staple handouts, etc., for the conference. That same week, local newspaper headlines reported that crew leaders had falsely recruited hundreds of migrants from Texas to work in the asparagus fields of southern Minnesota. The workers, on arrival, found themselves stranded with no actual work or housing. Families slept in parks, on the streets, and in their trocas.

Certain that there had to be a better solution to this nightmarish scene than just passing out coffee, I quit my internship and dropped out of school. I called up the Boycott office and told the director, Ross Williams, that I wanted to work full time.

I felt utterly compelled to work for La Causa; there is absolutely no other way to describe it. I was compelled by the pictures in the Minneapolis Tribune of migrant families sleeping in cars; and by the words to "Brown Eyed Children of the Sun" and "Pastures of Plenty." I was compelled by the dedication I saw in the boycott staff, and of course by the messages of Cesar Chavez about non-violence and empowerment. At 19, I was ready to dedicate my life to justice for farm workers and fully expected to do so. I could see no alternative for me, much to the chagrin of my mother and sisters, especially since I was giving up a huge amount of educational scholarship money.

I was looking forward to my time in the supportive organizing "Area" of South Minneapolis, where shoppers turned away from stores in droves when they saw El Aguila Negra on a picket line. Even though the staff was in transition (Ross Williams, long time director and UFW volunteer, was leaving and we were waiting for Steve Pittman to come up from Chicago), the staff was empowered for La Causa and several other new volunteers had recently joined, including Carol Law and Debbie Nelson (now Adair). We got a new, much nicer, boycott house, and I was soon learning the drills of Phone Calls, PV's (Personal Visits), and House Meetings. I hustled an office space in South Minneapolis with the Twin Cities Women's Union, and every night walked 12 blocks back to the main Boycott office to catch a ride home at about 10 pm. It was exhausting but I was having a blast and helping La Causa.

In August of 1976, we were told that the boycott office would remain only minimally staffed and we would all be going to Los Angeles to work on the Proposition 14 campaign. I had mixed feelings about this. I LOVED our house, my coworkers and my "Area." California was thousands of miles away, and seemed like Mars to my Midwestern heart. At the same time, I was willing to "do whatever needs to be done", a phrase I heard many

times while working with the Union. George Sheridan, longtime boycott staff, always introduced himself with this phrase, “Yo soy de cualquier parte que me mande La Union.” I am from wherever the union sends me.

So I packed up my duffel bag and a sleeping bag and we all headed west with some other folks from the Chicago boycott . The most fun was the all-women’s car, with me, Carol Law, Debbie Nelson and our friend Janet Smith. It was the first time I had ever been West, and I could not let myself sleep until I had seen a mountain. We sang and laughed and ate and wondered what California would be like. That trip remains one of my most treasured and fun memories. By the time we reached the Dominguez Seminary in Compton, we were both exhausted and exhilarated.

The Proposition campaign was a real roller coaster. The voter registration drive was grueling but fun. People *wanted* to register to vote, and I was good at it! However, I dreaded bumper-stickering, and the nightly accountability meeting. We each stood up and reported how much money we had collected and how many bumper stickers we had put on cars. One day I fell apart, and sat in the parking lot of some grocery store in San Pedro and cried. I just did not see how I could do it one more day. At the accountability meeting that night I lied. I said I had put on 54 bumper stickers, when I had actually thrown them in the trash. I took \$40 out of my own pocket money and threw it into the pot as the donations I had raised that day. But the next day I was at a Market Basket store in Wilmington and I once again pushed through to “do whatever needed to be done”: “Hi, I’m from the Farm Workers’ Yes on 14 Campaign. Can you help us by letting me put a bumper sticker on your car and could you give us a dollar for it? . . . Oh, sure I can understand not wanting a bumper sticker on that nice new (insert whatever was the fancy car of the moment). So can you help us with a \$5 donation?” All day long.

The bill-boarding campaign, on the other hand, was a refreshing and cheerful change of pace. No asking for money, just standing by the roadside with a great squad of Calexico farmworkers, waving, and getting people’s attention. I would later meet some of those workers again when I went to Calexico, and again in Arizona when I was working for Farmworker Legal Services in El Mirage. Bill-boarding was loads of fun but bone-wrenchingly exhausting, however. Weeks of sleeping on the floor (I did not get a mattress until late in the campaign), frequent 12 and 14 hour days, and irregular food quality took its toll. The irrepressible and dedicated Josefina Flores cooked fantastic breakfasts and dinners at the Seminary, but lunches were not always good. I remember a lunch of donated Twinkies and a bologna sandwich on white bread. Once when we didn’t have enough tortillas for lunch, we had beans on white bread instead!! Oh, and there was also the donated “Red Baby Soda”, which we jokingly called “Dead Baby”soda.

The night of the election loss was utterly devastating. All those hours and hours on the streets, the beans on white bread, the utter exhaustion, had not been enough. We were so sure it would be. I drove around LA that night with my friend Ann Benson and Jesse and David, some farm workers who had come down to help from the Porterville field office. Completely moved by our grief and our devotion to farm workers, they kept trying to reassure us that the world would not end, that the farm workers’ movement would not die, that not much would be different that week in Porterville, or Salinas, or Watsonville. Over

and over they told us how amazed they were by all the people who had come from around the country to help.

The days after the campaign loss were a blur. I felt numb. We cleaned up the seminary, and I remember hauling innumerable mattresses down from the auditorium. By the time we got to La Paz, we felt cheerier. The woods there were a refreshing change from Compton and I was interested in the La Paz scene and in being so close to so much Union leadership. But the weeks after the defeat were a time of great turmoil. I first became aware of it when my friend Janet Smith's brother Joe was fired as editor of *El Malcriado*. Then we began to hear rumors of a "purge." The national boycott directors, Nick and Virginia Jones, were fired. It was something I did not really understand, but I trusted that the Union leadership, especially Cesar Chavez, must know what they were doing. I remember the famous meeting in the North Unit building, when Cesar came in through the window during our debriefing meeting. We were told that a major reorganization was in the works and that staff might be moved around in order to do "whatever needed to be done." I was interviewed by Gilbert Padilla and others, and later told that I would be transferred to the Service Center in Calexico.

Looking back, I wonder how anyone thought I was a good candidate for *anything*. At least among the street staff, it was well known that I was frequently miserable. With a Capital M. Many days I said "Today I'm going to quit, I really am." But I persevered and was thrilled to have been selected to go to Calexico. I wanted so much to do this. At that time, the Union had a recruiting ad campaign based on the Marines ad: "The Farm Workers are looking for a few good men and women." I wanted to be one of The Few. The Chosen.

I was the only person from the Minneapolis boycott to end up in Calexico. Carol and Debbie had gone to Coachella, Ann went back to La Paz, and other campaign buddies were scattered from field offices to the boycott cities. I was very lonely, but I knew that I had to suck it up. With so many other urgent needs, it didn't seem like personal feeling had much of a place in an organizing drive.

I lived for a while in my sleeping bag in the Calexico clinic house, until Juan Guicho, the kindhearted and amusing service center staffer, found me a place to live with a generous farm worker woman, Rogelia, and her children. This was much more comfortable than the floor, yet lonelier in a way, as I was totally separated from my fellow volunteers. But Rogelia was so kind and I have never forgotten her hospitality. Plus, I had a blast watching "Los Pioneros" (Little House on the Prairie) and "El Hombre Nuclear" (The \$6 Million Dollar Man) with the kids!

Every day when I went to the service center, however, I felt totally overwhelmed by all I did not know. I kept saying, "But I don't know anything about food stamps or unemployment," and Roberto Ybarra, who had come from the Martin Luther King program in La Paz to help out, would jovially say "Oh, you'll learn!" On my worst days, I would freak out but he was always kind and sympathetic. He acknowledged that lack of adequate training was a big problem in the union. We often went from crisis to crisis, he said, waiting for the time to train and keeping fingers crossed that the quality of the "few good men and women" would carry us.

But the lack of adequate training really *was* a big problem for the Union, and for me. Not knowing any better, and thinking it was a minor salary deduction, I nearly talked a worker into signing a wage garnishment. He went to an organizer, who went on up the line to see who had given this poor worker such horrid advice, and it was quickly traced back to me, the only “gringuita jovencita” at the service center.

Mortified and heartbroken do not begin to describe how I felt when both Roberto *and* Marshall Ganz talked to me about it. I felt like I had failed, I had not been able to “do what needed to be done.” As I recall, I wasn't fired, but I was so ashamed and sad, I knew I could not stay and I resigned pretty much on the spot. I still feel twinges of stress recalling that conversation, more than 30 years later. I had failed at the thing I most wanted to do with my life at age 20: to help farmworkers.

Somehow I got a plane ticket (I have no recollection of how I was able to pay for it) to return to Minneapolis in early February 1977 after only 2 months in Calexico. I never worked for the Union again. The night I returned, a friend wanted me to go to a co-op board meeting to discuss whether or not the co-op should carry colored toilet paper. I thought of workers standing around in El Hoyo in Calexico at 5 AM to see if El Pinguino, a crewleader would give them a job. I thought of Rogelia, and her struggle to get enough work in the fields to feed her kids. The contrast was too great: I didn't go to the meeting. The cozy life of the South Minneapolis co-ops now seemed alien to me. I had come back to Minnesota a completely different person than when I had joined the UFW. But I had been right: the farm workers' cause was compelling and government bureaucracy could never solve the difficulties of farm worker life.

Still compelled by La Causa, I went on to work for several farm worker legal services programs in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Arizona. For 11 years, I spent my days looking for errant crew leaders and growers, and my evenings in labor camps, old farmhouses, and dilapidated trailer parks where workers lived. I once again lived in a sleeping bag. I did learn food stamps, unemployment, crewleader law, and even about wage garnishment!!

I eventually became the kind of tireless organizer and advocate that I so badly wanted to, but could not yet, be in Calexico at age 20. Frequently I mourned *not* working for the union, because it became even more clear as I learned more, that union contracts were the only thing that could offer any real protection. In the meantime, workers in Minnesota and Michigan and North Dakota and Illinois needed urgent help.

I have said for years that I could write the book, **“Everything I Need To Know I Learned in the Farm Workers' Movement.”** Despite the lack of training or support I learned a huge amount by trial and error. I absorbed everything like a sponge and when I was a little more grownup, I was able to put my experience into practice in ways that always amazed the people I worked with. I never returned to college, yet have had several different careers because of the many, many skills I acquired. Above all, I learned to organize, having been surrounded by the greatest organizers of the last century. Conversations about organizing happened at all hours of the day and night, with everyone. Conversations about how to effectively get press coverage, or get help from a VIP, or get a worker to sign an authorization card before an election . . . I did not know how much I had internalized until later and I shocked even myself, when I became a negotiator for my own union local's

contract -- the National Association of Legal Services Workers (district 65 of the UAW), and even later when I became president of the Minnesota chapter of the Cesarean Prevention Movement . . . I learned from Cesar Chavez and Eliseo Medina and Marshall Ganz; from Ross Williams, Mark Thiel, Kathy Lugosch, Judy Scheckel, and Steve Pittman on the boycott; from Mark Pitt, George Sheridan, Court Bonthius, and many others on the Proposition 14 campaign.

From Roberto Ybarra and Juan Guicho in the service center I learned the critical difference between charity and empowerment, and how to organize through service. They taught us that when we provided a service to people, we needed to ask for their help in return, that the union was not the welfare office, and that people needed to invest something. To do otherwise would turn the service center into a condescending social service agency, and further dis-empower the people we were trying to help. Charity, while at times humane and necessary, could be dis-empowering. Even the poorest, Roberto said, can always give something back: their time. Years later, when I was president of the PTA at a charter school with many Hmong students whose parents were only minimally involved, I asked them what they would like to do to help. "We can cook", they said, so I helped them organize an egg roll dinner where they were in charge. Not only was it a great fundraiser, but it secured their involvement in the school, and shocked the principal, who thought we shouldn't ask so much of them.

From Max Avalos and the "procurement" department during the Proposition 14 campaign, and from everyone on the boycott, I learned that anything can be hustled if you ask often and persistently. Even more valuable, I learned to ask *any body* for *any amount* of money. These two things have helped me to pretty much be the queen of fund-raising and donations of every organization I've ever worked for/with, I LOVE asking for money/stuff!

Ability to push through and do something I'm afraid of is another thing I learned, which, in situations from knocking on doors at labor camps to giving birth, has served me well. I am sometimes looked at as a person who fears nothing, which is the opposite of true. I am always terrified, but after crying in the parking lot in San Pedro and going back out the next day, I can always take a deep breath, remembering "Hi, I'm from the Farm Workers' Yes on 14 campaign . . ."

For many years, I found it difficult to talk about my time with the Union. My grief and shame from failing "Commitment 101" when I left the UFW in 1977 was palpable. Years later I learned that my time there was really the pre-requisite for "My Life 101," and that the skills acquired then have lasted a lifetime. It has been my privilege to know, and work for and with, many amazing and wonderful people over the years -- migrant workers and outside organizers alike -- and to give back more than they gave me.

I met Cesar Chavez briefly only once or twice, yet one of my most treasured possessions involves his autograph. When I left Migrant Legal Services in 1989 after 10 years, to raise my infant son, my boss wrote to Cesar and told him that I had spent many years working on behalf of migrants in Minnesota. Cesar sent a poster that he had signed: "Kathy, thank you for your years of working on behalf of farmworkers."

My impact on the farmworkers' movement may have been minimal, but the UFW's impact on me was life-changing and life-long. Every day of my life, I have been grateful that I was a part of it, and I feel honored to have my name on the "roster"