

Mike Rosenthal 1968 - 1973

I grew up in Brooklyn NY in the 50's and 60's, in a very pro-labor family. My mother was one of the founders of, and very active in AFSCME Local 1482 at the Brooklyn Public Library. My father, a milk truck driver was a proud member of Teamsters Local 584.

My first encounter with the UFW came sometime in 1968. My older sister had heard Dolores Huerta speak and invited me to join a picket line. Not sure what to expect that Saturday we picketed a Grand Union on Union Turnpike in Queens. From that day on I was hooked. Who could resist Dolores's organizing and persuasion? I think her biggest asset was to understand what would motivate an individual and then exploit that in a positive way to make you part of the movement.

Although my sister quickly lost interest, I quickly became committed to La Causa and my life took turns I could never have anticipated. I was attending Brooklyn College and started organizing awareness on campus. I became well know as "Mike The Grape" sitting at a table and distributing leaflets exhorting people to support the boycott.

During 1968 and 1969 I got more and more active with the boycott. I hung out at the Seafarer's Hall on 21 St, not far from where I live now. I worked closely with Peter Standish, Marilu Sanchez, Ronnie Sue Jaffe, Carol Simrell and others. They taught me so much about organizing and social justice.

Forgive me if I mix up the periods of the late sixties and the early seventies but others I remember so well are Julie and Wendy Greenfield, Gordon Victor and of course, Clyde Golden.

There was another group we called the Queens kids, Joanne Jaulous (sic), Louis Vanderbeek, Lizzie Gordon. Lizzie turned out to be the daughter of a teacher in my high school I found out later. I also became friendly with Marc Gabor from Westchester. Marc later spent many years working for the Clothing Workers, the Mineworkers and the New York State Assembly Labor Committee. I stayed in touch with him over the years until he tragically committed suicide as a result of alcoholism.

Also on the boycott at that time were many Filipino brothers and the very special Manuel Vasquez. No one worked harder than Manuel. We picketed so many stores, concentrating on Bohack a long gone NYC chain. We also did a lot of work at New York's ubiquitous small fruit stands. They accounted for a lot of grape sales but were hard to influence.

The fruit stands were mostly owned by fiercely independent mostly Italian-Americans. Even if they were sympathetic there was so much competition that it was hard to get them to agree to forego grape sales. Their argument was always, get the others and then I won't sell either. This was a catch-22 that was hard to overcome.

In late 1968 Peter, Paul and Mary put on a benefit concert at Carnegie Hall. The volunteers were given a place of honor in the front row. After the concert we went back stage to meet the famous trio,

In January 1969 I had my first arrest. We were picketing a very difficult fruit stand on 86th Street in Brooklyn. Lots of yelling back and forth. As always we were being "protected" by NYC's finest, the Police Department. Suddenly, the owner in a fit of rage punched me hard on the face knocking

me down. Before I hit the ground I was summarily arrested and hauled off to the local precinct. Of course the charges were later dismissed.

In November 1969 I attended along with many boycott staff from the east coast the anti-war moratorium in Washington DC. It was a tremendous experience and including sleeping at the Church on F St and participating in an enormous swell of people all committed to ending the war.

The day after the Moratorium, we returned from Washington and I immediately drove Peter Standish to his new assignment in Montreal. We almost never made it due to our youthful exuberance and disregard for logic. When we reached the border at Lacolle we were honest that Peter was staying in Canada to work. Of course that meant he needed a visa that hadn't been arranged properly before hand.

The border agents told us to call the Montreal office and get it straightened out. We figured we could easily circumvent that and proceeded a few mile east to Rouses Point where we tried to enter again, this time lying that we were just visiting. Even in those pre-computer days, they had a record of us and threatened to arrest us if we tried again. Seeing the logic of that argument we stayed overnight and the next day, someone, probably Jessica arranged Peter's legal entry.

By 1969 I had gotten very involved in the UFW and also Campus politics at Brooklyn College. My grades slipped and I was politely asked to leave. While continuing my volunteer duties I had a variety of jobs, including a stint in the national mailroom of A & P. Thank god we weren't specifically boycotting them at that time. I also began driving a yellow cab part time, which helped shape the rest of my life.

In early 1970 I landed a job as management trainee with the NY Stock Exchange. What a shock it was to my system to have to wear a shirt and tie and ride the subway to work. The corporate life quickly bored me and I made a momentous decision. I resigned from the stock exchange and committed myself to going fulltime on the boycott.

Using my own money I flew to Los Angeles and on to Bakersfield. Nora Casillas, Cesar's secretary at the time agreed to meet me when I got to Delano. Imagine her shock when she met me just out of town after I hitched from Bakersfield. I had a ratty old suitcase with large UFW Black Eagle bumper stickers all over. Little did I realize how foolish it was to be alone and hitching, proclaiming my loyalty in that way.

I settled in sleeping at Filipino Hall and made myself busy doing construction while Cesar decided where to send me. I grew to know Cesar and the other Union leaders and learned even more about the movement I was part of during that time. After a few weeks it was determined that I was either going to go to Dallas, or to Kansas City.

Eventually Cesar told me he chose Kansas City for me so that I could help Ramon Pasillas and his farm worker family there. I arrived there probably around late May or early June 1970. I quickly immersed myself in local boycott actives. The Pasillas family was very kind to me and I enjoyed my stay with them. Just as I became an integral part or the boycott staff and felt I was making a valuable contribution I did a foolish thing.

Late one night in early July, Kayleen Lowe, a woman I had met through the boycott took me on a tour of Kansas City. Stupidly we ended up in Loose Park at about 2 AM. Sure enough we got

mugged and my nose was broken. Rather than try to recover in a strange city I flew home to New York. I figured a few weeks of recovery and I would return to Kansas City.

Well you all know the story. July 29 came and I was stuck in New York with a broken nose. I recovered pretty quickly determined to get back to Delano as soon as possible. I flew out to Akron where Peter Standish was closing up the boycott office.

Together we picked up Tom Gannon in Indianapolis and headed west. One night we showed up in Omaha at Boys Town. When we explained who we were and what we were doing they welcomed us with open arms and fed us and gave us a rooms for the night. Later in the 1980s I was able to return the favor by helping Boys Town open group homes in Brooklyn.

By the time we arrived in Delano boycotters were arriving from all over. It was a tumultuous time and no one was supposed to go to Salinas unless assigned. Naturally everyone wanted to get into the fray as soon as possible. It was frustrating hanging out in Delano when the fight was in Salinas. One night Manuel Vasquez and I took a car and drove to Salinas to check it out. Somehow we managed to stay out of trouble

Finally we were allowed to move to Salinas. My first impression arriving at the labor camp we were going to live in was to see huge sheepskins drying on the racks from freshly killed animals we would be eating. Accommodations for the boycotters were no different then for working farm workers. A stark barracks with little place for privacy or comfort.

Everyday we would rise early and walk the picket lines with the striking farmworkers. It was not unusual to hear shots over our heads in the pre-dawn hours. Away from the picket lines we were generally accompanied by burly Seafarers to protect us from Teamster goons. No one was allowed near Denny's as that was a Teamster hangout.

As the strike wound down a caravan was organized to drop off boycotters across the country. Rather than face that long drive I flew home to NYC and began working on the boycott staff there. I believe Jim Drake was in charge then and I was assigned to the Bronx where I worked out of the old ILGWU office on Lydig Ave. I also remember Jose Gomez being in charge at one time and particularly his nemesis Bill Peters. The main office was then on Broadway and 28 St in Manhattan. That was also the time that Gino and Linda Parente became involved. What a strange couple they were.

In Match of 1971 I was asked to go to Albany to open a boycott office, with no money and one contact. My only contact in Albany was a gentleman whose name I can't remember, but was the editor of the United Paper Workers newspaper, which was headquartered in Albany at that time. He arranged for me to stay at a Catholic seminary, a little unusual for a Jewish kid from Brooklyn.

Later I connected through the Albany Federation of Labor and the State AFL-CIO with many labor leaders and other boycott supporters. Two that stand out were Tony Taback and Nick Pinto from AFSCME. For a while I slept on the floor of the AFSCME office. Later I lived in a halfway house for wayward girls in Arbor Hill and finally in a commune in a farmhouse in Guilderland.

After organizing in and around the Albany area for a few months I was asked to go to Buffalo and from there coordinate all of upstate New York. This was a monumental job since I traveled from Jamestown to Rochester to Syracuse and Massena. I was based in Buffalo and organized local support committees in many college and industrial New York towns.

In Buffalo I worked with Nora Casillas, Edie Camel and a strong local support committee. One of the biggest supports was a young Canisius College student, Barbara Genco. In 1974 I married her, continuing a Buffalo boycott tradition. My predecessor Alfredo D'Avila also met his wife on the Buffalo Boycott. Other active boycotters in Buffalo were Michael Smith, Mike Gottlieb and Arnie Zdrojewski.

The major boycott target at that time in western New York was Loblaws. We also boycotted many liquor stores. With the strong support of the powerful locals from the Steelworkers and Auto Workers we had good success. Among the offices I worked out of was the CWA where Jan Pierce was the regional director. He was a tremendous help.

In late August of 1971 I had been working so hard I contracted mononucleosis. To recover I came home to Brooklyn, but stayed in touch with both Buffalo and Delano. In September I received a personal get well letter from Cesar. This is one of my most prized possessions.

When I returned to Buffalo, a bill had been proposed in the state legislature to outlaw the boycott as well as strikes and picketing by farm workers. I spent considerable time crisscrossing upstate New York organizing a New York State Friends of the Farm Workers. I coordinated a massive lobbying effort to defeat this bill. Among the key supporters on that campaign were Rezin Adams and Moddy Gentile in Albany, Rod Frego with the UAW in Massena, Marcia Boyd with Legal Services in Rochester and many students at schools throughout upstate New York, clergy and others committed to social justice.

For reasons I don't recall the boycott needed to retrench and I was reassigned to New York City in 1972. Although I lived at home I spent considerable time at the boycott house on Wyckoff St. That's summer I met and worked with two boycotters who became good friends, Tony Yiannakos and Denise Jacquet.

I spent time in Albany where I was assured the anti-farm worker bill would be defeated. When it came up for a vote I was sitting in the gallery with Moe Smith NYC Central Labor Council lobbyist and Alice Strand the lobbyist for the Teachers Union. Both had been very helpful. Just before the vote, the sponsor "starred" the bill, essentially tabling it, which was not what we wanted. I bolted from my seat and ran to give him a piece of my mind.

Later on I continued working in New York City but continued to monitor the legislation. The New York State AFL assured Delano that the bill would never pass but my sources believed otherwise and I knew we needed to continue to lobby. I had arranged a press conference in Albany to showcase the opposition to the bill but was told not to go by Jim Drake.

Being young and foolish I went anyway figuring who would know? Just my luck I was misquoted in the New York Times the next day. I had been asked where farm workers worked in New York and I answered honestly. The paper made it seem like I had indicated that The UFW would be organizing those workers.

Of course Jim Drake saw the article and I was asked to leave the UFW. Although I can understand the attitude of Jim and the UFW leaders, I continue to be convinced that had I not continued the lobbying, including the press conference, the bill very well may have passed.

After leaving the UFW, I was driving a cab again in New York City with no real thought of where my life would head. One day the shop steward of the garage where I worked disappeared. I called the office of Local 3036, then a Directly Affiliated Local Union of the AFL-CIO and asked what happened to him. They didn't know but asked if I would take the position.

I became shop steward and began volunteering at the Union office on Park Ave South in Manhattan. Harry Van Arsdale, Jr was then the President of the Taxi Drivers Union as well as the New York City Central Labor Council. I soon became a Trustee of Local 3036. The Education Director of the Union was Hy Ballin whom some might remember has represented Harry in Delano in 1970.

In addition to driving a cab and representing the workers in my garage, I was asked to represent drivers charged with rule violations at the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission. I loved playing lawyer and being part of that process.

In December 1975 I was forced to pull my garage out on strike because of many contractual violations, including bounced paychecks. When the company went out of business I began volunteering full time at Local 3036 rather than drive for another garage. I was involved in all aspects of the Union administration and learned so many things.

By April 1977 Harry Van Arsdale resigned from Local 3036 to concentrate on the CLC. The new President, Ben Goldberg immediately appointed me Recording Secretary a position I held until the Union's demise in 1997. I also served as a benefit fund trustee and well as administrator. In 1978 Local 3036 ceased being a DALU and affiliated with the Service Employees International Union.

Over the next 20 years I was involved in all aspects of running Local 3036. Conducting negotiations, arbitrations, lobbying and working with our pensioners. I was heavily involved with the Taxi Commission and as well as the SEIU and the CLC.

In 1985 I experienced my most cherished Cesar story. I had maintained some contact with whomever was on the boycott in NYC but wasn't very active. That year the SEIU had their international convention in Toronto and I was a delegate. Cesar was scheduled to address the convention of course.

Canada was in the midst of a national phone company strike during the convention. The strikers arranged a big press event involving Cesar picketing with them. Since it was near our convention hotel, many SEIU people were asked to bolster the picket line.

Naturally Cesar's presence brought out the press in droves. He was interviewed and filmed the whole time he was there. But while he was walking with the thousands of strikers and scrutinized by the cameras he spent considerable time talking to me. He was keenly interested in how the taxi industry and labor in general were going in NYC. He could ignore the hubbub all around us, and concentrate on me, and what I had to say. He made me feel very special.

That was not my last interaction with Cesar. In 1989 he visited New York City on a fundraising and organizing trip. I took my 8-year-old son to see him. My son donated some money to him and I took a picture, which we used as a Christmas card that year. I am so proud of that photo of my son Andrew with Cesar.

Outside of the Taxi Union throughout the 80's and 90's I was active in my community in Brooklyn. I was Chair of the Board of our local YMCA. Served on the Boy Scout District Committee and many other local civic groups. For 20 years I was Chair of the Parks Committee of the Local Community Planning Board.

In 1990 I was divorced and thought that I would continue with the Taxi Union until retirement. But the taxi industry had changed and the Union hadn't kept up. It was slowly losing the confidence of the members. In 1997 the fleet owners took on the union and refused to negotiate. Without grass roots support the Union couldn't survive. The SEIU merged Local 3036 into Local 74 and I was out of work.

After a brief period of unemployment I got a great job. Oddly enough it was with the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce. After thirty years in the labor movement I felt I was going over to the enemy. But the Brooklyn Chamber is not conservative nor is it anti-labor. It is a positive advocate for economic development and growth in Brooklyn and New York City.

I was hired to create a program called, Good Help. We help small businesses in Brooklyn to find, hire and retain employees. I am very proud of the fact that in the last nine years we have placed 1400 individuals in positions. Many of those were public assistance recipients with many barriers to employment.

One last fact to bring my life up to date. In 2000 while searching the Internet I found a woman whom I had known when I was five years old. We had been casual friends throughout our school years and then lost touch. One thing led to another and although she lives in Montreal and I live in Brooklyn, six years later we are in a very committed relationship.

The past forty years have been an incredible journey. I never could have predicted where my life would go and where I would be today. Working with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and all the committed volunteers has had a profound influence on my life. I am truly happy with my life today and all I have accomplished. And grateful for the opportunity to have played even a minor role in helping farm workers, taxi drivers and now job seekers.