

## Mary Sanchez 1974–1975

### La Paz

When my brother-in-law, Richard Griswold del Castillo (author of *Cesar Chavez: A Triumph of Spirit*), told me about the Documentation Project, I wanted to be a part of it, albeit a minuscule part when compared with the activism and hard work of others. His wife, Rita Sanchez, who is my sister, encouraged me years ago to join the farmworker movement, she along with Albert Fritsch, SJ, of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, whom I met at St. Peter's on Capitol Hill while working in Washington, DC. Now, with the Vol. II deadline looming, I am forced to fire up the neurons and stretch my thinking back to Labor Day, 1974, when I finally drove up to La Paz in my trusty red 1966 Dodge Dart and began working harder than I'd ever worked in my life for a man who was working harder than I'd ever seen anyone work.

Fortunately for me, I was wearing the La Paz “uniform”—Levis, Santa Rosa farmboots, and cotton shirt—when I was spotted heading toward the administrative offices. There, I had been told, I would report for work as secretary to the administrative assistant to Cesar Chavez. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant in those days, but Carlos assured me in his phone call to West Virginia, where I was on an extended retreat in a rural farmhouse, that “you'll see.”

Yes, I would definitely “see,” as I began one of the most rewarding years of my life.

But back to that first day. As I would later learn, if you were seen near the La Paz offices and you were carrying your own typewriter and looking eager, you were a hot commodity. To Avelina Coriell, who ran Cesar's Work Department, I was “hers.” I may have been the subject of mistaken identity, but she acted as if she was expecting me and immediately sat me down to start typing 3x5 cards.

In those days, I didn't keep a journal. I didn't record my day-to-day activities, except for occasional letters home. For one thing, we were much too busy during the day and way too tired at night to even think of documenting one life during what actually were historic days in California. I didn't know who was who and what was what. I only know I had written to Cesar and told him I was ready to join him in his mission of work and prayer on behalf of the *campesinos*. If it meant being a typist for *La Causa*, then a typist I would be.

I was not escorted to Cesar's office to meet the boss, à la corporate America. No, it wasn't until later, when I began typing boycott materials, answering Cesar's correspondence, running it through the postage machine, and then hauling daily bundles off to the tiny Keene Post Office in that old Dodge that I even talked to Cesar in person.

Most of what I knew about the UFW was what I'd read or learned from others who, like me, were deeply interested in justice for the poor and personally committed to nonviolence

and voluntary poverty as a student of Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa of Calcutta as well as of Ghandi, Francis of Assisi and, most important, a close walk with Jesus Christ.

In those first hours at La Paz, the only one I recall being formally introduced to was Juanita. Juanita was friendly, twinkly-eyed, and wearing a red bandana to hold back her extremely curly hair. I noticed that even though she was operating an ancient Gestetner mimeograph machine, which periodically broke down and spewed ink, her fingers were immaculate. Funny, I remember that kind of detail but don't recall the names of the other pieces of antiquated machinery in that two-room office, the likes of which I had never seen before and have never seen since. However, I came to know the machinery intimately in that office, which Cesar had appropriately named the Work Department.

It was here, in this arm of the administrative office, that all letters, all correspondence of all kinds, all donations, all boycott information to cities around the world, all confidential files, duplicating, and all mail were handled.

It was there I was to work six days a week, nine hours or more a day, for \$5 a week and room and board. I had spent the last of my journalist's retirement money on the used Dodge, purchased off a lot in San Bernardino, and was one of the few volunteers at La Paz to have a car.

My co-worker, Juanita, laughed a lot, and when she did, her eyes almost closed. Her ready smile and those sparkling eyes put me at ease in the unusual surroundings. I had never done secretarial work. My life was as a reporter and press secretary, so I could type but had made my living writing. Now here I was in what looked almost like a museum of office machinery with a farmworker's daughter teaching me what real hard work is. Juanita could no longer work in the fields because she suffered nearly debilitating migraine headaches, the result of being in the wrong place in the fields when a crop duster made one of its poisonous drops. The only hint that she was often in pain certainly was not in a slowing down of her work. It was only a dimming of those smiling eyes that belied her normal, steady, work pace. Later, I was to meet her hero-father at their home in Arvin (or was it Lamont?) after his release from jail.

Juanita and Avelina's husband, Bob Coriell, taught me how to pound out—yes, pound—letters on a relic from the past that was a forerunner to the keypunch, a forerunner to the computer, but a far cry from the Mac G4 PowerBook on which I'm typing these words. The relic worked on the principle of a player piano. I hammered out a form letter and the keystrokes made rectangular holes in the paper. Typos were corrected by patching the paper roll with Scotch tape. Spaces were left for date, address, and salutation. These were inserted later for a personal touch. In fact, Cesar personalized many of them and sometimes added even more personal comments in his own hand. I inserted the composed letter on a cylinder. This roll was carried to another machine and “played” like a typing piano.

Our antiquated style of mass mailing was nothing like the efficient, slick way now widely used by the current UFW administration to generate donations. Ours, used to further the boycott and to aid in organizing, required the use of two more relics of technology. One involved a heavy iron piece of machinery with a foot pedal. On this I punched out metal address cards. The cards were precariously lined up on another machine, which “automatically” addressed hundreds of envelopes. Often, these cards slipped off the belts holding them in place, and everything ground to a halt.

Later, Juanita and I actually met the inventor of the Piano Roll Typewriter (that’s not its real name). We went in my Dodge to his dusty office, somewhere in San Gabriel. He was a gracious and humble man who seemed thrilled that we drove out to learn more about his invention. We also went to Bakersfield to look at typewriters with “mag” (magnetic) cards that might possibly replace our relics. Cesar was considering investing in some new technology. Nothing resembling computers was to come during my short stint at La Paz.

I lived in the wood frame house almost adjoining the offices, and except for Elaine Graves, who lived there too, and Ann McGregor, my closest friends lived in the hospital. Brother David Jorgensen, Frances Kay Hvolboll, Ann Marie, and I became close friends. In my letter of application to Cesar, I told him I was coming to pray with him in the style of Jesus, Francis, and Ghandi. With the help of that trio of friends, that’s what I did. We tried a visit once to the local church and even showed up there one day for Mass. The parish priest and his flock were what one might charitably describe as “underwhelmed” by our presence. Nevertheless, at La Paz we had a simple chapel in one of the rooms where we gathered to pray the Hours—the Divine Office of the Catholic Church—chanting psalms with or without others present or lying prostrate in front of our very simple tabernacle. The Blessed Sacrament was consecrated by priest-volunteers at Mass in the compound. We spent many fruitful hours in chant and prayer in that little room. In one corner stood Brother David’s large banner of St. Francis with the inscription, “Harm No One.” He had carried it in marches. It said so much about the struggle.

Once, when Cesar was on a fast, Brother David invited me to join with him in a juice-only fast. We juiced fresh fruit for each “meal” of the day. It was my first juice fast. Previously, I had fasted for short terms on water and bread. The high sugar content of the fruit—no grapes!—gave me severe stomach cramps and bleeding hemorrhoids. But soon I became acclimated and actually reached the point where solid food simply held no value for me. We fasted and prayed for 14 days. It was exhilarating knowing that we were joined with Cesar, who so often deprived his body of food for the sake of nonviolence. We broke our fast in the community kitchen with Brother David’s organic vegetable soup. Frances and Ann didn’t join the fast but were always there in chapel for singing the psalms and Gospel praying.

It was Brother David, a tender, compassionate, and hardworking volunteer from the Capuchin Order, who also encouraged my vegetarianism. I knew that Cesar’s diet also consisted mainly of vegetables. He once complained about being tired of the bloating

caused by his mainly raw-vegetable diet, which he often washed down with liberal amounts of diet soda! He once said he was going to try becoming a “fruititarian.” Someone laughingly scolded, “You might as well. You’re already an ‘air-itarian,’” referring to his strict fasts.

Some of the memorable times with Cesar at La Paz nevertheless revolved around food. On December 12, a day Catholics honor Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, everyone gathered before dawn to sing “*Las Mananitas*,” after which we were treated at that early hour to steaming hot chocolate and Mexican sweet bread. Cesar personally gave us another treat, a shot of tequila. We all did a full day’s work just the same. At Christmas time, the playful nature of Cesar showed itself as the instigator of a holly berry fight. While sitting in the community dining room for Christmas lunch, something hit me on the head. I turned around and saw nothing suspicious, only a chatty Cesar passing the time with someone at his table. Soon, at a nearby table, I saw a red berry pop off the head of someone else. That victim responded in kind, and soon a small flurry of red berries was gently pelting Cesar and anyone else within shooting distance. We did it nonviolently. Really.

We worked diligently and steadily, but we always had time for spontaneous, joyous moments of fun. Ours was not a grim-faced crew. And on paydays, we took part of our \$5 weekly salary and splurged at the Roundup Cafe in Tehachapi on peanut butter pie. I even wrangled the recipe but never made it myself. Or we drove to the Caliente Store for ice cream sodas at an old-fashioned wooden soda fountain. A trip to Lake Isabella was one special Sunday outing, and, rarely, due to rationed gas, we went into Bakersfield.

One of the funniest memories of Cesar and my Work Department assignment came when Cesar decided it was time to clear brush and plantings from around the buildings in the La Paz compound. The danger of fires always bothered him. So he took a tape recorder and a couple of his assistants around the grounds while he pointed out what needed to be cleared. Unfortunately, the effort failed because when he gave it to me to transcribe, all I could hear was Cesar’s voice: “I want this one taken out completely. This one needs to be trimmed...,” etc. No one had taken notes or photos to accompany the taped narrative.

Even though snow in Keene was known to cover the grounds as late as May and bring out the little twittering chickadees, the summer heat dried out the foliage. Thus, we had fire watch. I wondered what in the world I could do with a flashlight and a walkie-talkie when I got my first fire watch assignment. Yes. It was 3 a.m., and a gentle knock on the door reminded me it was my turn. I think we were the most diligent with fire watch when Cesar was home. I was told to be on the lookout for anyone throwing Molotov cocktails and that Cesar and La Paz would be a juicy prize for the union’s enemies. So I splashed a little cold water on my face, took the flashlight and walkie talkie, and began my rounds. I did, in fact, spot a unidentifiable car, which I reported to the guard station at the gate. As it turned out, our intruders were only lovers, not Molotov cocktail warriors. I think the barking of Boycott and Huelga, Cesar’s two shepherd dogs, and the “watch geese” at the gate were

more off-putting to this neophyte fire watcher than anything else I encountered in the dark of the night.

During community meetings, we learned some of the “inside” news firsthand from Cesar about this or that grower’s recalcitrance. I learned names like Giumarra and about Delano and Filipino Hall at Forty Acres, and I groaned along with everyone else on movie nights when, inevitably, the projector bulb would burn out and everyone moaned. Years later, I saw an old “M\*A\*S\*H” episode on TV that could have been a re-enactment of our movie nights when the bulb blew. We would stomp our feet and then begin to sing “We Shall Overcome” and other movement songs. I think it was Ruth, who grew organic vegetables in a little patch at La Paz, who doubled as our projectionist.

When we did leave La Paz by bus to walk the picket lines or march against Gallo at Thriftymart stores and Safeway, I rarely knew what towns we were in. This greenhorn union worker didn’t know or even ask where we were going when we’d scramble onto buses for *La Causa*. It was exciting, and we lifted each other up with songs that were new to me. My pidgin Spanish was a disgrace. But I was a quick study when it came to doing the union handshake, the special hand clap that started out slowly and grew to a roaring crescendo, and singing the rousing songs in Spanish, as well as one of my favorites, “Union Maid” by Woody Guthrie:

“There once was a union maid who never was afraid  
Of the goons and the geeks and the company freaks  
And the deputy sheriff who made the raid.  
She went to the Union Hall when a meeting they would call.  
She showed her card to the National Guard, and this is what she’d say,  
‘Oh, you can’t scare me, I’m stickin’ with the union.  
I’m stickin’ with the Union, I’m stickin’ with the union.  
No, you can’t scare me, I’m stickin’ with the union,  
I’m stickin’ with the union till the day I die.”

On those bus rides, we practiced the UFW chants, “*Viva la Huelga!*” “Boycott Gallo!” and sang “*Solididad por Siempre,*” (Solidarity Forever), “We Shall Not Be Moved” and of course, “*De Colores.*” We stopped at a park and were treated to beans and rice and watermelon. Cesar shouted his boycott message into a microphone while deputy sheriffs wandered menacingly among us as if we were about to start a riot. It was a joke to me then. Joan Baez sang at one of the rallies, maybe at Patterson, although she mentions none of this in her autobiography. And even though I saw Cesar at work or around La Paz, I never took pictures of him. But at the rally in the park, I found myself trying to get close enough for shots with my tiny Kodak Instamatic 10 with the dove of peace sticker on the front. I got a few. As bad as they were, I treasured them.

The volunteers kept their distance from the stage and let the farmworkers move in closely to hear Cesar. Plus, our feet were sore, and we sometimes had time just for a little rest,

some nourishment and bathroom breaks. It was gratifying to see how the people responded to Cesar's words and it buoyed us volunteers. I was amazed at the respect and high expectations Cesar sought and received from uneducated *campesinos*, who became among the best of the best union organizers. Because of Cesar's inspiration and the faith in them and the movement, these same workers were emboldened to speak face to face with workers in the fields as well as with powerful growers. Also, they learned firsthand the power of the peaceful boycott. It's how Cesar recruited them, and it's how he taught them that a simple, nonviolent alternative to hatred of the growers and their "sweetheart contracts" wielded much more power than an all-out war.

One of the saddest moments with the UFW was the three-mile funeral march for one of the strikers, who was shot and killed by a Kern County sheriff's shotgun, which also paralyzed a 13-year-old boy and wounded two others. It was the first time I had seen the union's black eagle symbol on a black field instead of the usual bright red. And I hope I never will again.

Among the many reasons I wanted to be a part of the farmworker movement was Cesar's attitude and the method he used to organize and to engender compassion across racial and ethnic and religious lines in the struggle for justice. I admired the way he used the strike and the boycott as nonviolent weapons against growers, avoiding what he called "senseless violence that brings no honor to any class of people." He knew it since boyhood. "The rich have money. The poor have time." He was willing and ready to do public penance for the sin of any striker who was tempted toward the violent way.

We marched together against Gallo to Modesto. That 15 miles on foot was the longest walk I'd ever taken for any reason. But the energy on the road was palpable. Otherwise, I could have been an early drop-out. On one occasion, we encircled the Bakersfield city jail with watery eyes from Mace that had saturated the area in preparation for our arrival, and we held a pray-in, kneeling on the cement steps of the downtown jail. There we would witness a "camera shootout" between a photographer from *El Malcriado* and a sheriff's deputy, who went at it nose to nose with their cameras. A sight to behold! We gathered on the steps of the state capitol in Sacramento for the sweet victory the day the Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed in 1975, even though on the way home some of us were victimized by a pickpocket. Slim pickins'.

The fortunate ones, the seasoned ones, at La Paz were chosen to participate in the organizing campaigns, while those of us in the Work Department kept the home fires and those ancient old office machines humming. And one of my most humbling but joyous experiences was of once being asked to lead the opening prayer, which was a regular part of all UFW board meetings, in the La Paz conference room.

My UFW memories, bolstered by a few facts gleaned from my old letters home, seem enough to last a lifetime. The experience of this long essay brought to mind people with whom I have lost touch, including Brother David and Frances Hvolboll, and Father Bill

James of Memphis' St. Jude Headquarters, who loved calling people to Mass at La Paz by banging a kitchen spoon against a kettle. He loved watching the trains on the Tehachapi Loop. Most of all, I marvel at the strength expended during my short stint with Cesar, given my present, not-as-energetic condition. Cesar's fortitude was contagious. He, like Paul, knew, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13)." And the Work Department's effort is paled by the struggle of the *campesinos*, which continues even today, 31 years after I first drove the Dodge up the winding road to La Paz.

With Francis, I pray,  
"Praised be you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
Who nourishes us and teaches us,  
Bringing forth all kinds of fruits and colored flowers and herbs."

And I would add my own line to Francis' canticle:  
"Praised be you, my Lord,  
though our brothers and sisters in the fields, who feed humanity  
When they often are barely able to put food on their own tables.  
May they always look to you for provision."

(Kathleen Lawrence was the copy editor for this essay)