

Delano – A New Harvest For Migrants

by Henry Santiestevan, Editor of Agenda and Director of IUD Information Center 1967

“We started out with a portable clinic and brought our equipment in a box on weekends when the doctor was here.”

Soft-voiced, attractive Peggy McGivern has a fragile, gentle air about her that belies the steel-tough determination that has led her to dedicate her professional life to the health needs of impoverished farm workers in Delano.

A registered nurse from the San Francisco Bay area, she came to visit Delano three years about when she heard of the bitter, lonely fight for dignity being waged by Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA).

“I just felt that this was where I belong, so I stayed,” she said.

And so Peggy McGivern, R.N., became part of La Cause (The Cause). Patiently and quietly, she began to minister to the health needs of farm workers, despite an almost overwhelming lack of resources.

She dedicated herself to the slow, hard, often discouraging task of developing a health clinic which started in a borrowed room of a striker’s home with meager equipment carried in a cardboard box.

Today, the clinic operates from two large house trailers outfitted with donated, used equipment, offers dental and health services to members and families of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO, and is on the point of acquiring full-time services of a resident doctor.

And the health clinic looks forward to significant development and extension as part of the newly-formed National Farm Workers Service Center.

The Service Center, explained LeRoy Chatfield, executive director, flowed from the original NFWA, which began by offering services to farm workers.

“You see, Cesar Chavez had to have some way to really involve the people,” Chatfield said. “The way he did it was through a service program.

“A lot of times I used to be with Cesar—long before the strike—and someone would come knocking on the door with a problem. In the beginning, Cesar *was* the service center.”

La Huelga—the strike—began in September 1965, when members of the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee walked out of the Delano vineyards and were quickly joined by the NFWA. It soon attracted national attention and support which led to rapid developments.

The AFL-CIO backed La Huelga in a resolution adopted at its 1965 convention in San Francisco in December. Right afterward, UAW President Walter P. Reuther came to Delano and pledged financial backing of the UAW and the Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO, which he also heads.

Last August with the merger of NFWA and AWOC into the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO (UFWOC), Cesar Chavez became its director and Larry Itliong, formerly Delano director of AWOC, became assistant director.

A few days after the merger, a concerted campaign was climaxed by a decisive election victory at the giant DiGiorgio Corp. The DiGiorgio win, together with an earlier agreement with Schenley Distillers covering field workers, meant that the farm workers now had an established union.

With UFWOC an effective, working union, a decision was made to formulate a structure for the service arm in order to under-gird union activities, Chatfield said.

“It was decided to separate all service activities into a National Farm Workers Service Center, formed as a nonprofit corporation in California with a 15-man board of directors,” Chatfield said.

Chavez, president of the NFWSC, and Itliong, vice president, work with a 15-man board of directors drawn from the farm workers and the community.

The NFWSC is charged with coordinating and developing the health clinic, the Farm Workers Cooperative, Credit Union and El Teatro Campesino (Farm Workers’ Theater), all of which are separate entities, and the social services offered to union members.

With UFWOC, directed by Chavez, free to concentrate on basic union activities—organizing, collective bargaining, grievances—NFWSC can handle the service functions with flexibility of action aimed at the constant objective of assisting members of the union and their families to handle their problems in the community, improve their skills and enable them to better their general living conditions as well as strengthen the union.

NFWSC is also in a position to draw on support for service operations from other sources, including unions, foundations, governmental agencies and private organizations.

Thus, the IUD now channels significant support to farm workers through the Service Center and the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty cooperates with the Center to set up a training program to develop farm worker leadership.

With the strengthening of organizing and ‘traditional’ union activities through UFWOC, and extension of services through the Center, farm workers are developing two effective, coordinated arms in the building of their organization shaped to meet their needs.

“We are trying to build a union which is not only the traditional kind of economic institution which can help the worker by improving his wages and conditions,” said Chavez.

“We are trying to build a union which can serve as the base for developing many programs to fill the cultural and social voids which have come about through so many years of social and economic maltreatment.”

The credit union, a familiar institution to millions of union members, began as a struggling group of seven members, which brought something entirely new to farm workers—a chance to save money in their own organization.

Under the supervision of Helen Chavez, the credit union is growing steadily—and so are the assets. The credit union’s stabilizing influence on farm workers beset with economic and social uncertainties adds an important aspect to the welfare of the union and the community.

A special social service division has been set up to handle farm workers' individual or family problems arising from their relationships with the community. Many such problems can be traced back to community indifference, hostility, or rejection. Some flow from inadequate communications complicated by language problems.

Bonnie Chatfield and Jessica Govea, who handle the social service division, function much like shop stewards, but instead of on-the-job grievances they take care of community grievances.

As "community stewards" for the farm workers, they discuss problems with school principals, representatives of service agencies, immigration officers, police or civic officials.

Farm workers who belong to the union no longer are confronted, alone and unprotected, by a community completely alien to them.

Most colorful of the activities grouped under the Service Center is El Teatro Campesino, lusty, earthy, Farm Workers Theater which brings to roaring life the aspirations and accomplishments of La Huelga.

Luis Valdez, director of El Teatro and former field worker who was born in Delano, gets his talent "right off the picket line."

"We always start with basic realities," Valdez said, "because the whole basis of the theater is convincing farm workers to join the union."

As an organizing instrument, El Teatro is a smash hit, drawing together hundreds of farm workers in areas where they would otherwise be hard to reach.

And as a touring theater company raising money for the union, it has scored rave reviews.

The San Francisco Chronicle called it "a lusty combination of music, satire and propaganda . . . It's vital, earthy and vividly alive theater."

El Teatro Campesino takes talent from the picket lines and the fields and translates deprivation and exploitation into satiric, comic explosions—and builds a union.

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