

Mike Miller 1968-1969  
Volunteer mechanic, occasional bus driver in Delano

I had one thing in common with all of the other volunteers for the UFWOC or the union: none of us ever started out in life with the goal of helping out in the farmworkers struggle, and we all got involved by different paths and for different reasons. How I went from Ithaca, New York to the Texaco gas station on Cecil Avenue in Delano was just as indirect a path as most of the volunteers followed.

In 1967 when I graduated from Cornell University, the Vietnam war was really heating up, and I had no choice but to confront the issues involved head-on. Through high school and college, I was strongly against the war, and I was not willing to enter the army to help out with the endless destruction championed by the US government. When the time came, I went downtown to the local draft board in Ithaca for a personal appearance.

The men of the local draft board (#62) were serious people with a difficult job to do, and I gave them credit for doing the best they could with their beliefs. I also told them that I was willing to do the required two years of alternate civilian service as a so-called conscientious objector (CO), or they could send me to jail, but I wasn't willing to fight. I supplied them with supporting letters from high school teachers, and others, to show that I hadn't just come by my stance that week. They treated me with courtesy, and I left the office.

One week later, I called the secretary of the board, who was a cheerful and forthright woman. She told me that the local board automatically turned down any CO, and let the appeal board decide the matter at the next level. I was distressed to hear that they hadn't really looked at the evidence, and not knowing what else to do, I wrote directly to Gen. Lewis Hershey, the head of what was called the Selective Service. I didn't think they were being very selective. I received a quick reply from one of the General's deputies telling me to "rest assured that all relevant information" would be considered. Without knowing it, I had caught the local draft board doing something that was embarrassing to the national Selective Service. I had another appearance before the local board, again treating them with respect and sincerity. They told me that they could see that "you aren't one of those bearded flag burners." It was true, I had no beard.

One week later, I called the secretary at the local board again. She was still cheerful, and told me that I had been given my 1-0 status as a conscientious

objector, and would need to pick out a position approved by Selective Service. There would be a little delay in processing the papers as they had to order the “1-0” rubber stamp from headquarters. The local board, it seems, had never before given CO classification to anyone.

I started work at Fellowship House Farm in Pottstown, PA in July of 1967 as the “farm manager.” The farm was used as a weekend retreat and summer camp by a Philadelphia neighborhood organization which was in an old fire house on North Girard Avenue. What it really meant was working as the factotum, plumber, carpenter, mechanic and most of the time living by myself on 126 acres with 5 cats. Fellowship House was founded by a group of integrationist-minded freethinkers hoping to improve racial relations in one of the tightest ghettos in the US. They were being passed by as the black militants gained traction with the younger black population. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. really set them back, because there were hard feelings towards any white person for months after it happened. After the founders died, the house and farm were sold or closed. You can’t even find them on Google, which means that they really disappeared.

Towards the end of my first year, I was about crazy with being alone, and working for a group with what seemed to be a chaotic approach and an ineffective program. I visited a friend of mine in New York City who was giving himself a going away party before moving to Africa with the Peace Corps. One of the New York grape boycott workers, Candi Clarke, was there and I started talking with her.

I had been following the boycott through whatever appeared in the New York Times, and was very sympathetic to their cause, coming from a family of pro-union immigrants. Candi told me that the union was desperate for mechanics to keep their fleet of old cars running and the organizers on the road. I had been fixing cars since my early teens, and had actually taken a correspondence course in auto mechanics in high school. But I knew that the union was politically hot, and I didn’t see how Selective Service would allow me to make a move. The answer was simple, she said: Get yourself transferred to the California Migrant Ministry, and Chris Hartmire would send you to the union.

I applied for the transfer from the Pennsylvania Selective Service board, and they approved it. I called the Farm Workers’ Co-op and talked with Fred Dresser, who was running the gas station at the time. “It’s hot, it’s dry, and a lot of people here don’t like us. If you can put up with that, you’ll be alright.”

Fred was always an affable man, but he had a direct, mid-western way of approaching things.

In July of 1968, the bus came belching to a halt in the dusty parking lot of the Greyhound station on High Street (I think), and Fred Dresser picked me up in his heavily worn Mercedes sedan. My tools had been sent on via Railway Express. We have the internet now, but Railway Express is extinct, along with a lot of other things from that era.

Work began the next day, and for the first week, I slept on the floor of Fred's apartment. I met my co-worker at the garage, Donacio Garza. Don was a small, skinny guy from Harlingen, Texas. He was a paid employee, not a volunteer, and he was used to the Mexican way of fixing cars. I was used to looking things up in shop manuals, and Don's motto was "...we're going to make it run. Get your head out of the book!" We got along well, after Don realized that an educated Gringo could do the heavy lifting for him ("...Mike, give me some horse power here") and could fix things almost as well as he could might be a good thing. I worked ten hours a day Monday through Friday, and a half day on Saturdays. Don spoke good English, and was a talented mechanic. He was also a musician, playing drums on the weekends in a local band.

I found a place to live after about a week living with Fred Dresser. It was a garage apartment in the backyard of the house on Kensington Street where David and Gloria Perlin lived downstairs in the house and the upstairs was used by various people, including Elaine Elinson. Gloria worked in the law office for Jerry Cohen and David Averbuck, and David was working towards getting his Longshoreman's union card.

Most of my meals were at the Sala Filipino which was the union hall and meeting place until the Forty Acres complex was completed. The Pink House was the nerve center of the union, but the Sala Filipino was the stomach. The food commissary was also there for families needing donated food items brought in by out of town volunteers.

Working at the garage was pretty interesting because we not only saw and interacted with a lot of union people, but also had a lot of outside customers as well. Considering what we had to work with – a bunch of old cars, an open-air garage, and no budget to speak of, we did the best we could. Mostly the cars kept going, and the organizers and volunteers didn't get stranded on the highway very much. But nearly everyone complained about the garage. I didn't understand it at first until David Fishlow explained it to me. David was a lot

more politically astute than I was. After all, he was from the big city (Queens, as I remember) and I was an unsophisticated apple-knocker from the rural part of New York state.

David told me that all organizations have a hierarchy, and somebody had to be at the bottom. For UFWOC, the garage was the bottom, and we not only fixed the cars, but also gave people a feeling that at least there were others in the organization that were dumber and less competent than they were. We were thus psychologically as well as mechanically beneficial.

In the evenings, I often went to the Delano Public Library, which unlike my little flat, was air conditioned, and near the laundromat. It gave me a chance to read the newspapers, and get a little bit of outside perspective on what was going on, both in California with the politics surrounding the union, but also the “outside world.” You had to be at least a little myopic or develop tunnel vision, making the union your sole focus in order to survive.

At the library, I met some local school teachers. Mark Ritter and Jamie Legler were both teaching grade school, and they hadn’t chosen sides in the union-grower conflict. The political issues hadn’t trickled down to their classes, I think, and they were just trying to do the best that they could with their students. It was a little like coming up for air, talking to people who lived in Delano, worked every day, but weren’t totally enmeshed in the union’s conflicts. If they had really confronted the atmosphere of paternalistic racism that was California politics at the time, they would have had a hard time teaching, because they were working with a lot of Mexican and Chicano kids in small schools outside of town.

I also got to know the people at the local auto parts stores on High Street – Green’s and Hainline’s. They were right next to each other. I got to know the clerks pretty well too. One of them, Jesse Peralta, got me to join the Delano Judo Club. When Fred Dresser asked me if I was getting dangerous, I told him “...only to myself.”

Politics were inescapable. I watched the Democratic National Convention from Chicago at David and Patty Averbuck’s house. Mayor Richard Daley’s thugs lost control of the floor action, and Jerry Rubin’s Yippies were glad to take advantage to increase the chaos. When Abraham Ribicoff accused Daley of using “Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago”, the cameras focused on the enraged Mayor. Lip readers interpreted his response as “...fuck you, you no good Jew bastard”. It went downhill from there.

We also watched Neil Armstrong step out on the surface of the moon. It wasn't as important or as startling as the concept of Richard Nixon as president. One important lesson that I learned from what happened in Delano, versus what we saw on the news, was that the work of revolutionary change is fundamentally boring and tedious. The union ultimately succeeded because we all kept on with the boycott, kept on with the mimeograph machines, kept on collecting food for strikers, kept on calling on the WATS line, kept on fixing old cars, kept on meeting every Friday night at the Sala Filipino, kept on and on and finally just wore the opposition out for a while. Cesar Chavez and the rest of the leadership were brilliant at maintaining the focus.

When I finished my obligation to Selective Service and regained the freedom to lead my own life again, I left Delano and the union, and returned home to New York for a few weeks. I painted my mother's house to earn a little money. I was up on the ladder painting the house red, with white trim, listening to the radio describing what was temporarily the third largest city in New York state: Woodstock.

When I finished the job, I got 1949 Chevy truck for \$150, rebuilt it in the driveway, and drove it to San Luis Obispo to start horseshoeing school at Cal Poly. That's where this part of the story ends.

Postscript:

I finished horseshoeing school at Cal Poly in December of 1969, later paid my way through medical school as a farrier (horseshoer).

I live in Huntsville, Alabama with my wife Beth. We have two grandchildren. I still work as an orthopaedic trauma surgeon, and as a farrier. Because of my work, I treat a lot of folks without money or insurance, and substantial numbers of "Hispanics", a term that I don't think is particularly accurate. I have spent time in Colombia doing and teaching surgery, and as a result, my Spanish has improved over the "garage Spanish" that I learned in Delano. My time in Delano, and my upbringing put me politically and philosophically at odds with most of the spoiled, rich, reactionary doctors that I work with now. I keep hoping that eventually, they'll begin to gain a bit of compassion and understanding. But I'm not holding my breath on that one.