

Lessons from the life of a great American: Cesar Chavez

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I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!
Cesar Chavez

California, and three other states, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, officially recognized by State Holidays the 80th anniversary of the birth of an extraordinary American, Cesar Estrada Chavez, the late founder and president of United Farm Workers of America, an American veteran who served his country in the U.S. Navy in WWII, the first American trade union leader to create a viable union for farmworkers where all other attempts in American history had failed, and an American civil rights leader of Mexican descent who served and enriched his country and the lives of Americans of every race, color, and creed by a lifetime “of sacrifice for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice.”

Cesar did not merely, speak, but lived those words, and there are lessons to be learned from that well-lived life. My own life has been enriched and influenced beyond measure by what I learned in some twenty years working with him, starting in 1973 when I was a trucker participating as a leader of the “Truckers For Justice” in a nationwide truckers shutdown in the so-called “Arab Oil Embargo,” in which oil companies reaped windfall profits, and including the years I served as one of his attorneys from 1979 until the day of his death on April 23, 1993.

I emphasize that I was but one of thousands who worked with Cesar Chavez through the years, others who did so much more than did I in aid of him, his cause, and the UFW; I emphasize that I write these words not to celebrate my association with him, but to celebrate him, Cesar Chavez, and the life he lived.



CESAR CHAVEZ and Rees Lloyd of Banning are shown at press conference in 1973 in Tuscon, AZ, announcing the formation of the Alliance of the United Farm Workers of America and the Truckers For Justice, who refused to haul any lettuce or grapes not bearing the UFW union symbol.

I will always walk in the shadow Cesar Chavez, a great and humble man who lived his faith, and was the moral heart of the American labor movement in the last half of the 20th Century.

Cesar Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, on the small ranch near Yuma, Arizona, that his grandfather had purchased in the 1880's, and which the Chavez family worked and thrived on until 1937, during the Depression, when the bank foreclosed and the giant Bud Antle lettuce corporation based in Yuma took over the Chavez' land. The family, when Cesar was 10, went from being American landowners, to "Mexican" migrant workers, living and working in conditions which appalled America when they became known years later, and which were improved basically because of Cesar Chavez touching America's heart with his non-violent service.

In 1944, at the age of 17, while WWII raged in Europe and the Pacific, Cesar Chavez joined the U.S. Navy. When he came home on a three-day leave, he engaged in his first non-violent civil disobedience: He deliberately sat in the "White" section of the then-segregated movie theatre in Delano. He was arrested; taken to jail; but they couldn't figure out what to charge him with (U.S. Sailor sitting in the wrong place in wartime?). So, they cut him loose with threatening warnings that he should know his place. Cesar returned to Navy duty defending his country, notwithstanding.

Ironically, Cesar's life ended where it began, in Yuma, and in a fight with the powerful Bud Antle Corporation, largest lettuce grower in the world, which had taken his family's land back in 1937..

That is, Bud Antle sued Cesar, and the UFW, in the Yuma, AZ, courts, claiming Bud Antle had been grievously damaged by the "Lettuce Boycott" which Cesar led -in California. Bud Antle sought millions in damages, which would break the UFW.

Bud Antle's lawyers called Cesar as a witness. When his examination by Bud Antle's lawyers was complete, Cesar, following his custom, went to the home of a UFW member where he was staying. (Cesar's practice was to stay in the modest homes of members, and not incur hotel or motel bills.)

After supper, he went to his room, kicked off his shoes, lay on the bed, and began reading a book concerning entrepreneurial projects which could aid the poor, particularly Native Americans.

Cesar Chavez died peacefully in his sleep that night, April 23, 1993.

Those who entered the room when he did not respond to their knock, said his

shoes were off, but he was still dressed, as if having dozed off while reading. They said there was no evidence that he had suffered any pain or distress. Indeed, the book he was reading still rested on his chest, undisturbed. Further, they said it appeared that Cesar had a small, serene smile on his face.

“God came and took him,” observed an elderly farmworker, as heads nodded and crosses were etched by callused hands in common assent.

The court was informed of Cesar's death and a motion was made for a mistrial, since Cesar had testified under questioning by Bud Antle's attorneys, but died before UFW could elicit his testimony.

Motion denied, said the judge, stating he would give the UFW ten days to bury Cesar, and the trial would resume as if nothing had happened. He rapped his gavel, a fitting exemplar of the judiciary.

More than 50,000 people made the pilgrimage to Cesar's funeral in Delano, where Cesar had first gone in 1962 with his wife, Helen, and their eight children, to organize what would ultimately become the United Farm Workers of America.

The trial resumed in Arizona under the same berobed autocrat who had denied a mistrial. I was honored to be one of the attorneys defending the UFW and Cesar as the trial continued, my role to write motion after motion to the great discomfort and distress of the jurist who makes obscene the command that we address judges as “Your Honor.”

As expected, the jury found for Bud Antle (surprise, surprise), the biggest employer in the Yuma area, and against Cesar and the UFW for the boycott against lettuce staged not in Arizona, but in California. They awarded some \$3.5-million to Bud Antle, enough to bankrupt the UFW.

But the UFW was born of Cesar Chavez and it had learned one of the primary lessons his life taught: Never give up, never surrender in the fight for justice. Ultimately, after years of litigation, the UFW won; the judgment was thrown out by higher courts. Bud Antle, the rich and powerful corporation, lost everything to Cesar Chavez, who would not give up.

Cesar's son, Paul, once said to me of his father's persistence: “Did you have one of those little cars when you were a kid that you wind up, and it takes off and, when it hits a wall, it bounces off then hits the wall again, and again, and again? Well, my Dad reminds me of that little car. It won't quit. But the difference is, with my Dad, the wall falls down.”

I have remained a civil rights and workers attorney to this day, and proudly

now represent primarily my fellow veterans in The American Legion. I think of Cesar daily in those efforts, and remember daily the great lesson he taught back in that truckers strike in 1973 when it appeared I would not be able to prevent violence from erupting as we had 253 truckers blockaded in a truck stop for two weeks.

Cesar, who was my mentor in that strike, admonished me so loudly and emphatically, that I had to hold the phone at arms length away from my ear, but I heard, and remember, every word:

“Rees, if there is violence, it is your fault: It is a failure of creative intelligence; a failure of creative intelligence.”

At the time, I said, not to him but to myself, in a huff: “What does he know? I'm the one here, I'm the one with the problems.”

But later that day I picked up the newspaper, and spotted a story saying the Tucson blood bank had run out of blood and needed help. I called a meeting, pointed out that we were getting lambasted by the media over our strike, and, if we gave blood to the people of Tucson, maybe we would be seen in a different light. The truckers voted to give blood, and I called the media.

The next day, we loaded up the trailers of two eighteen-wheelers with strikers and drove to the blood bank. With television cameras running, out of the trailers came the Truckers For Justice, cowboy-hatted, cowboy-booted, walking John Wayne-tall, to give their blood to the people of Tucson, true Knights of the Road.

The atmosphere completely changed. The media began telling our story, and the people of Tucson began taking truckers into their homes for the duration of the strike. The threat of violence evaporated. Although there was violence all over the country, there was none in our strike in Tucson - thanks to Cesar Chavez.

We created an Alliance of the United Farm Workers and the Truckers For Justice in the aftermath of that strike. Cesar Chavez told me then that I needed to go to law school so that I could better serve; it was his recommendation that later opened the doors of law school to me. After graduation and passing the State Bar in 1979, I became one of the volunteer attorneys for the UFW, and Cesar.

In my work as a civil rights, workers rights attorney, including proudly representing my fellow veterans in The American Legion, whose cause in defense of our veterans memorials and cemeteries against fanatical secular-cleansing attacks to remove all religious symbols I believe to be a major civil rights issue of this era, I am guided to this day by the lessons taught me by Cesar Chavez.

Not the least of those lessons is to never to surrender in the cause of justice, to act with audacity, but always remember that “violence [is] a failure of creative

intelligence.”

I am infinitely grateful to Cesar Chavez for these lessons, and, most of all for the lesson, and example, of his life.