

Ethel Kennedy

CR 140, SR 67

00:00:05 Mrs. Kennedy, what are your earliest memories of Cesar Chavez? Is it Bobby? Did Bobby come home and tell you a story? What, what did, what was the first time you heard about Cesar?

00:17 Well it was uh, before Bobby and Cesar met. Uh, he used to talk about him because uh, I think he from the very first time he read about him he felt um, here was a kindred spirit uh, someone who had to struggle for everything and uh, who was really concerned about his people and who stood up for them and uh, he just thought here is my kinda guy.

00:53 So when he went and met him what, what was the impression when he went and met him? I guess it was, it was what the late 60's when he met him. What, did he come back and say anything to you?

01:01 Oh yes. Oh yes. He was very excited about him. He had um, been asked to go and uh, support the boycott and, and meet with Cesar and it was in the middle of his campaign and um, he turned to an aide who was a very close friend of his, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Ed Guthman and uh, he said, well I got this invitation, what do you think? And Ed said, well the people who like you are still gonna going to like you and the people who dislike you are gonna still dislike you, uh, what's your feeling? And Bobby said, I like Cesar. And so in the middle of this very strenuous campaign uh, he flew to California. And uh, but on the way he stopped at uh, Des Moines at where he gave some campaign speech for uh,

Governor Hughes. And Governor Hughes knowing Bobby was coming got three other governors there and uh, so Bobby said why don't you all come with me? We'll all go see Cesar together. And they one reason or another they were, it wasn't on their agenda so but they did write him a note and all four signed it and all he could think of you know how were they gonna get out of that room without writing that note. Anyway he, they when Bobby finally met Cesar uh, was in a very small dark room and he was very weak from fasting and uh, he Bobby gave him the note, well ? gave him the note and uh, he was very grateful for. But when the, the very first moment when they met Bobby said well uh, how goes the boycott Cesar? And Cesar smiled and said how goes running for President Bob? And so uh, they both laughed and embraced and then I thought it was wonderful the two of them uh, with as I say Cesar was very weak and, and Bobby helped him uh, to this homemade altar where um, together they broke the bread of social justice. It was very nice.

03:47 Now there's, there's photos we talked about the photos, the images of, of Bobby taking com, communion. Did he describe that day when they went to mass and took communion together? Do you, did he ever describe it, what it was like to be there with Cesar?

04:01 Well yeah uh, you know he was just full of uh, admiration and affection for him when he came home. He just uh, you know felt he'd met one of the great men of our times. And uh, I think he felt a, a really deep closeness to him, they shared the same values and uh,.....

04:28 What about, when was your first time, your first meeting with Cesar or any member of his family?

04:34 Well uh, it was um, a couple of years after we lost Bobby and uh, they uh, asked if I would come see Cesar in Salinas. Uh, he was in prison and um, I was honored to be asked so uh, I went out, I think that there was some sort of threatening atmosphere and um, I think that the labor unions, no it wouldn't have been the unions it was.....

05:21 I think Paul, Paul Schrade was the one that arranged for you to go out there and he, he escorted you to uh, he told us the story and we have him on camera telling us the story already but we've also seen footage of some big guys escorting you through a crowd...

05:35 Rayford Johnson.

05:36 So could you tell us the story...

05:38 Well it was just uh, I called up Rayford because uh, uh, we had gone together to uh, Alcatraz to see the Indians and he was very helpful at that time because it was the same kind of atmosphere. And um, so uh, we went and I think you had to walk through the, the, the union people formed um, kind of a barricade against people who were trying to crowd in and I don't know they had sticks or something. It wasn't, anyway it was very, I, I don't really like to talk about that as much as meeting Cesar.

06:21 Ok, ok. You went in and saw Cesar in, in jail. What, what, what was that like? Once you got in and you saw him what was, how was he?

06:32 I was uh, I was struck by his spirituality and his uh, reserves of gentleness and tenderness and uh, caring and love. I mean it was really like what I think it would be like to meet Christ. I mean it was, he was just his spirit was so giving. He was amazing and of course he was very handsome and that didn't hurt. But he was in a padded cell and uh, I thought how dare anyone do this to this saint. How, how, how could they treat him as like he was a lunatic or criminal, I mean it was, it was very affecting and it made me very angry that he could be treated so.

07:33 Now so years later in 1988 you went out to see him fasting and I'm sure you had some kind of reaction to see this gentle man who was wasting away. Do you, do you recall.....

07:46 But in the prison he had lost all his fingernails because he had fasted so, so much. I mean the depth of caring was beyond belief. Um, but later yeah, in 1988 uh, a whole bunch of the children and I went out and uh, we were with Cesar's family and his children. Uh, children actually don't like to be called children when they're forty years old, you know?(Laughs) and I'm sure it's the same in the Chavez family. Anyway um, they, it's a real source of comfort to see another generation um, imbued with the same spirit of uh, commitment and caring.

08:36           But when you went out, you went out there with several of your children

08:38 Yeah.

08:39 What was it like to be there? What, I'm, I'm, I'm wondering were, were you, when you saw him were you concerned that he might, that he was....

08:46 Oh very concerned and very upset that this uh, great spirit was wasted, not in the good sense of the word. Uh, but that you had the feeling he wouldn't be around long enough to continue the fight that he was giving his life so that others could have a better life and uh, oh I mean it's tough to see.

09:20 I, I would imagine that there were probably people there, we talked to some family members that, that said we tried to talk him out of it. Do you, do, do you not try to talk a man like that out of, out of striking?

09:32 Well you know you're just butting your head against a wall that he has seen one way of going through life which is so different from everybody else.

09:43 Um, now do you remember, I mean Bobby and Cesar had contact over, over, over the years.....

09:50 Yes.

09:51 Was, was that relationship, did that evolve or was it pretty much the same kind of relationship that of mutual admiration from the beginning?

10:00 Oh, I think it was instant when they met. And as I said I think that they were kindred spirits before they met. They both uh, recognized in the other the same uh, values and the same hope for the country and hope for the people who were having a tough time.

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10:40 Um, your family and the Chavez family I'm sure have some...

10:46 You know what, excuse me can we cut? Why don't you ask me the question about the poem right off, about the lines? Then I can.....

CUT

10:53 Now you read a poem that at, at, at a recent speech that you gave for I guess Cesar's memorial. Could, could you read that poem and tell us what....

11:03 Well it was just uh, they were lines from um, called, *When I Think of Those Who are Continually Great*, no is that right? *When I Think Continually of Those Who are Really.....*

11:29 Now does this describe your....

11:30 Ok why don't you ask again?

11:33 This, this poem that you read at, at, at a memorial for Cesar does, could you read that for us or could you tell us that poem?

11:39 Oh, that was from a poem uh, *When I Think Continually of Those Who are Truly Great* and there were some lines that are just um, *born of the sun they traveled toward the sun and signed the vivid air with their honor* and I thought it just captured Bobby and Cesar beautifully.

12:08 That's really nice. Thank you. Um, your family and the Chavez family do have some, some bonds um, could you tell us how you, Cesar, Bobby hit it off so well beyond that.

12:26 Uh, well it's nice because it seems to have uh, transcended the generations, this great friendship there and uh, the children and, and I uh, go to the boycotts and we did the fasting and uh the marches. I, I don't think the farmworkers walk, they're always marching. Well anyway and um, our son Bobby is an environmental lawyer, he works for the Nat, Natural Resources Defense Council and uh, at the end he helped Cesar a lot with the pesticides and he gives still today speeches about it.

13:20 Now, now you got to know Helen.

13:23 Yes.

13:23 Could you....

13:24 Oh I'm just crazy about Helen, she's so real and uh, wonderful and uh, I often regret, regret that uh, we're not in the same city 'cause I think we'd see a lot of each other.

13:38 What is it about her that, that, that strikes you the most?

13:45 Well first she's good fun to be with and uh, hey her, her values are, she's got her list of priorities and they're, she's right up front. And there's no uh, kidding around she, she's going to do what she's going to do and she's going to help but

she's such a, I mean she's going to help the farm workers who really need it and help those in trouble but she, her family means so much to her and uh, she's surrounded by them always. She has many, many grandchildren and she's always with them and with her children helping. I just like her a lot.

14:38 Um, now do you have any memories, anything that stands out in your mind about Cesar or about his family, is there other stories, is there anything that you can recollect that we should know about? Some incident that stands out in your mind that I may not have asked you about that kind of captures the story of Cesar.

15:10 Well I think now wait a minute.

CUT

15:23 Did the fact that, that, that Cesar and Bobby were both Catholics was that, was that a factor in, in bringing it together? Did religion enter in to this at all?

15:35 Oh well Bobby would have been with Cesar no matter what he was but uh, the fact that they were both Catholics uh, and when, certainly didn't hurt and when Bobby went out there uh, to break the fast um, you know it was a very um, uh, kind of colorful background with all the union posters and the religious symbols and uh, and uh, the signs saying Solidarity, Siempre. Uh, it, there's a, a closeness there, an identification that they both had since they were born so uh,.....

16:37 Cesar said there wasn't that much difference between a Catholic Mexican and an Irish Mexican.

16:44 Laughs. I think that's about right. Yeah.

16:48 Now is there, is there a memory that you have that kind of stays in your mind about Cesar, the movement?

16:58 Well there are so many. Uh, now Cesar came on the board of Bobby's memorial and uh, right here in this room. He made so many contributions to the direction that we were going in and uh, he was very proud of the uh, Hispanics who were Robert F. Kennedy fellows and were doing such good works and the various communities a, across the country and uh, it was such a uh, uh, wonderful relationship you, although we didn't see each other every day whenever we saw each other it was like there had been no time passing and we saw each other on many occasions uh, when he would come to New York or Chicago or wherever we were having a function he would come to it and as the children and I would go to whatever he was interested in. It was just an easy relationship.

18:15 How would you describe him now, now that Cesar's passed? What, who was he? What, what was he to, to you?

18:28 Well to me he was a great leader, I mean a great man first. He was someone that you could be with and never want, wouldn't matter if anybody else was around because you were around him who, who was so straight in, in what he believed in and so deep and profound and wonderful and then that fabulous smile and uh, he just kept, you felt comfortable around him and he was a very warm, giving, loving spirit and uh, who had really in front of your eyes sacrificed his life and um, to help those who needed it who were less well off and uh, for me one of the most moving moments and one I'll remember to the end is at Bobby's

Anniversary Mass, the twenty-fifth anniversary at Arlington when there were twenty thousand people on the hillside and President Clinton, uh, Mrs. Clinton and a lot of wonderful people there and Cesar getting up and speaking and then receiving communion. It was beautiful.

20:02      Thank you.

END