

Notes on Debbie Miller Archive - June 21, 2009

Most of the material I submitted is 30 plus years old. After reviewing it, LeRoy asked me “Why did you save this?” and encouraged me to answer this question in an introduction to this archive section.

In part, the answer is “I save stuff.” A lot of stuff. Especially stuff that has words that tell, or might someday tell, a story. Some examples: my first diary, written when I was about 12, and every journal since then (I did no journal writing during my UFW years, perhaps these materials are the story of those years); a scrapbook of elementary school valentines; a high school English essay which suggests that I might go to college so I’d have a back-up career if being a housewife didn’t work out; the essay that accompanied my application to the Smith College Masters of Social Work Program (thankfully, I was not accepted, leaving me free to pursue the education in community organizing offered by the UFW); a large collection of UFW leaflets, flyers, handouts, press clippings, contracts, and publications, from which I selected what is included in this archive section; reports, grant applications, and newspaper clippings related to my work from 1987 to this week; first drawings, school papers, and clippings about anything my son, Daniel, was involved in; my own poems and writings over the years; and a fair amount of junk mail, assorted old bills, and so forth. Trash and treasure.

And maybe that’s the core of why I kept, saved, stored, moved, protected so much paper. Some of it was treasure. At 22, I never imagined that some of what I saved would be historical treasure for future generations, but it was treasure to me. Some people collect antique glass, jewelry, shoes, stuffed animals, old cars, teacups and so forth. I collect words. I collect words because they tell stories – my story, your story, our collective stories. And if we don’t save and share our words and our stories, we lose part of who we are as human beings.

I’m grateful to LeRoy for the incredible gift of the Farmworker Documentation Project and the opportunity it creates to share our stories of the farmworkers movement. Many of us have contributed material and money, but LeRoy’s passion and dedication have made it happen. Too often, the stories of the poor and the oppressed, and their struggles for social justice are not told, or, worse, are altered by historians. This Project offers original voices telling first-hand stories. The truth as each of us saw it.

The essay I wrote five years ago for the Project focused on my experiences on the Connecticut and Montreal boycotts, and the meaning I found in those experiences. I spoke of the “six-million person miracle”. The materials I submitted for this archive, in particular the Connecticut and Montreal boycott materials, offer a glimpse into the nuts and bolts of the everyday hard work that created this “miracle” that resulted in agribusiness agreeing on labor relations legislation for California farmworkers.

I hope that those of you who read, skim, or browse this archive, and the Farmworker Documentation Project in general, are inspired to know that social justice is possible when one person tells a story of social injustice to another, who tells another, who tells another, and they then join together and work together to create a new story of justice. It was a blessing in my life to be part of the farmworkers movement. I wish such a blessing for each of you who read this.