

'We go where we're needed'

His job is sowing seeds for farmworkers' union

It's not what you'd call well-paying work.

But Mark Pitt, 25, and other members of the United Farm Workers Union take pride in the fact that they make as much as union leader Cesar Chavez.

"We make \$5 a week, plus room and board," explained Mark, who joined the UFW four years ago after graduating from the University of Maryland. Since then he's worked in five states organizing workers in the fields, collecting signatures for various ballot proposals, and registering voters.

In short, anything that needs to be done, says Mark.

He is one of about 100 workers canvassing the Los Angeles area to get signatures for a farmworker initiative. If the drive is successful, California voters will vote in November on whether farm workers have the right to conduct secret union elections.

"We need to get 540,000 signatures in 30 days," Mark explained. "That's pretty awesome. Most of us are on the streets getting signatures 12 hours a day, and then we go to meetings at night to see how we've done."

"We figure each person needs to get 200 to 300 names a day. But 200 is easy in a good location. We were very lucky that 'All the President's Men' premiered when it did. Most of the people in movie lines are just standing there, looking for someone to talk to. We did very well."

Life with the UFW is an uncertain kind of existence, Mark admits. It means moving from state to state, city to city, wherever the union decides help is most needed.

"We work because we want to see something accomplished for the farmworkers. It's something that needs to be done. It's a chance to work for your fellow human beings and do some good."

Married for over a year, Mark and his wife have a two-month-old son. The baby goes to work with his mother at a UFW office.

Living conditions are no problem, said Mark. The UFW has offices and living quarters in about 40 cities nation-wide. Most of the workers live with five or six others in a rented apartment. In New York, about 20 workers live in a large house.

"People are very understanding. Everyone is working for the same thing. It's easier to live with people who are all dedicated to the same thing. If someone had a bad day, you can understand it because

the ballot. But at the rate we're going, there's almost no way we can't make it."

UFW supporters have already collected over 475,000 signatures, he said, well over the 312,000 needed. But as with most initiative drives, the union expects that about 35 per cent of the names will be disqualified. That's why their push for signatures continues.

Mark expects to keep working 18 to 20 hours a day until April 30, the end of the initiative drive. After that, who knows?

"If the initiative gets on the ballot, we'll probably have a voter registration drive and a publicity campaign just before November. But right now, I'm not thinking past April 30."

As always, Mark isn't sure how long he and his family will stay in Los Angeles. What is certain is his dedication to the union.

"I don't expect *not* to be doing this kind of work. Right now I can't see anything else I want to do. There's certainly enough work to do. There are 3 million farmworkers in this country, and we haven't even scratched the surface."

One of the major victories for the UFW occurred in California last September, he said. The state legislature passed the first bill in the United States to give farmworkers the right to vote in union elections.

It's the same goal the union is once again reaching for in the initiative. So what happened?

It's simple, said Mark. Funds for the elections ran out after six months. The legislature has refused union demands for more money.

"It's a cruel joke. The farmworkers waited a long time for the elections. Many of them took part in the elections under a lot of fear for their jobs. They did so because the bill (providing for the elections) protected them. Of course, the bill isn't seeing to that now."

Without funds, elections are no longer being held, and some of the board members appointed to oversee elections have resigned.

The UFW hopes to change the situation with the initiative. If it passes, the elections bill would become much more stable and functional than before, Mark believes.

That's because any changes in election procedures would have to be approved by voters, just as the initiative was, he said.

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"We delegate responsibility. Everyone does his share. In large campaigns you might have one person who does nothing but the cooking, and another who does the cleaning. They do their part that way."

During short-term campaigns, Mark and other workers have shared housing in churches, seminaries and convents, he said. Other times they live with friends, sometimes for a month or two.

"They feed us, too," he says, smiling.

Organizing in the fields is probably the most difficult work he's done, he continued. In Florida, he was arrested several times for trespassing. The Supreme Court later overturned the convictions, ruling that union workers have the right to go into labor camps to talk with field hands.

Mark shrugs his shoulders when asked about his arrests. "I don't take them very seriously. It's just harassment. It's a way of trying to break you down so you won't want to go on. I certainly don't feel like a criminal."

Vandals have damaged union cars and offices he's used, he said. And during the initiative drive, he isn't saying exactly where he and other workers are living.

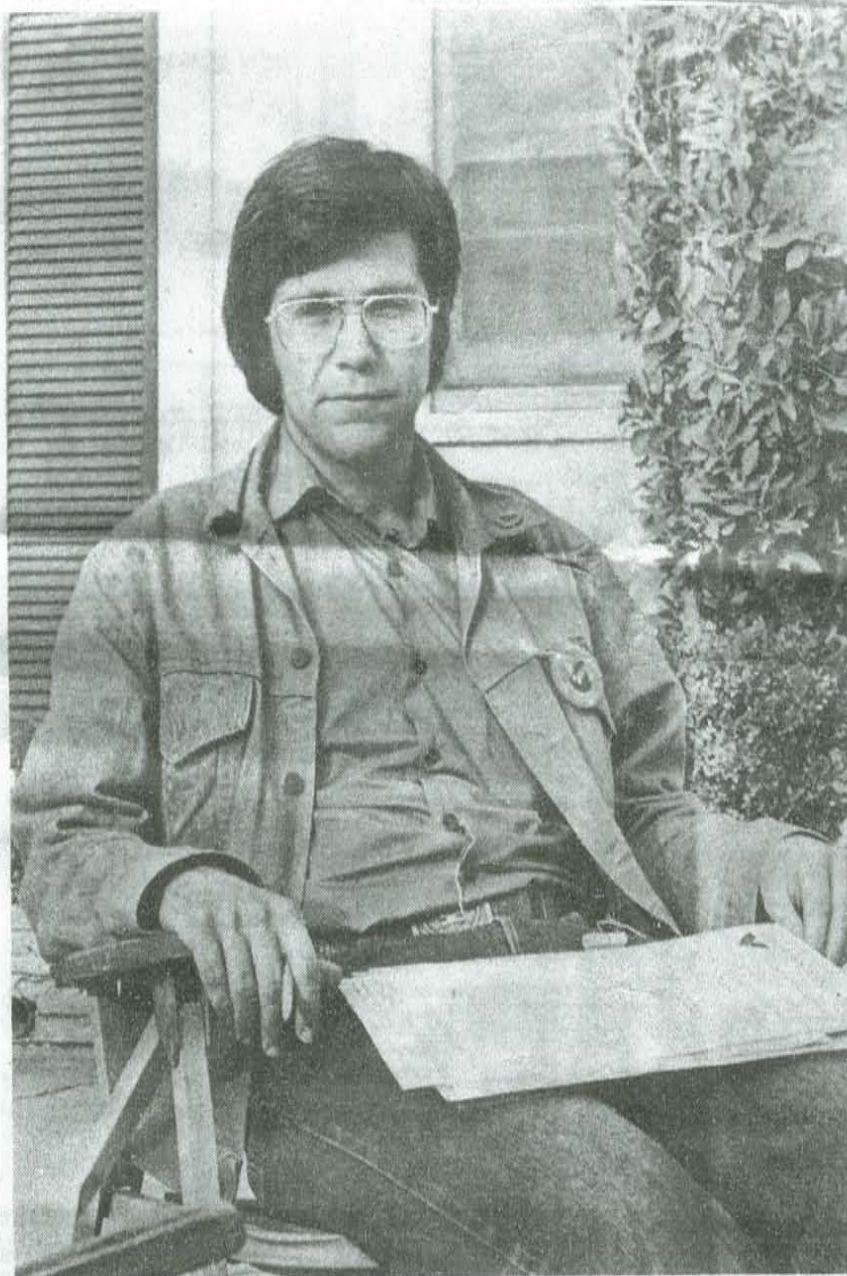
"It's becoming tense. The growers obviously don't want us to get the initiative on

procedures would have to be approved by voters, just as the initiative was, he said.

He expects the bill to pass in November.

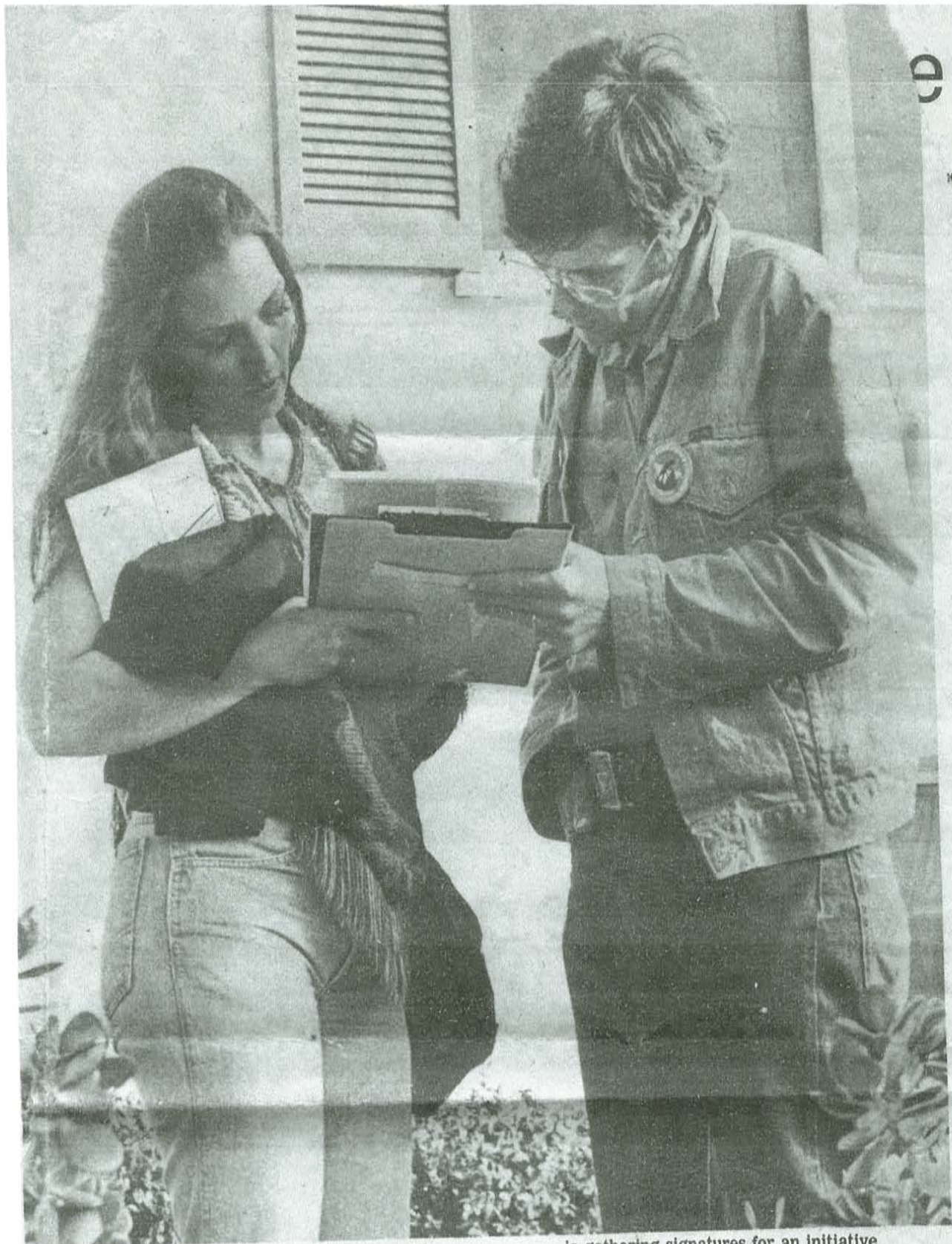
"All we're saying is that farmworkers

last year, she declared an o despite overw



Mark Pitt has worked four years for the union, and says he can't foresee a time

when he wouldn't want to be a part of UFW.



Getting signatures is a 12-hour a day job for Mark Pitts, 25, who works full time for the United Farm Workers. The UFW

is gathering signatures for an initiative on secret union elections for workers.

should have the same rights as everyone else in this country."

But even the most basic of reforms for the workers have come slowly, he admits. Only last year, short-handled hoes were finally declared an occupational hazard, he said, despite overwhelming evidence that the

hoes caused permanent back damage to workers.

"It's ridiculous. States have had to pass laws to get toilets for field workers. Are things so bad that we need laws for toilets? Yes, they are. In fact, many states can't even get the law passed."