A Learning Experience, With Credit, for 18-Year-Old: Working for Farm Union

BY JUDY KLEMMERUD

If somebody held a sweepstakes for the most interesting vacation story, Laurel Reiner of Oxnard, Calif., would win the grand prize — and you could call it a vacation, too.

Laurel, 18, is one of a growing number of students who are putting aside the competition for good grades in favor of a real world experience. And now that she’s done her share, she’s so proud of her efforts that she’s prepared to share them. She has written this account of her experience to help others understand the value of hard work.

“Laurel Reiner, a college freshman, spent the summer as a strike organizer for Cesar Chavez’s farm union.”

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Laurel, an 18-year-old freshman at Marymount College in Tarrytown, N.Y., spent most of the summer working as a strike organizer, side and general factotum for Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers Organizing Committee in California.

Often rising as early as 3 a.m. and sometimes working 22 hours a day, she passed out union leaflets to Mexican workers as they crossed the border to work as "stooth" laborers on California farms. Laurel, who had previously worked in medical clinics, wrote what she called "Spanish propaganda," verbal conflict with chauvinistic main union members, raised $305 for a station wagon for the union, and marched in Huelga (strike) parades.

"Knowing the People"

"I consider it a learning through action," Laurel said recently in her mother’s comfortable home on Cedar Lane in Oxnard. "That’s the most important thing. I don’t see how people can be educated just by sitting and reading things. You’ve got to participate and know the people.”

Laurel’s stint with the 75,000-member United Farm Workers union came about last winter when she signed up for a course at UCLA that required her to work for a nonprofit agency. She ended up working for the union April 19 through Aug. 1, and received her high school diploma in absentia.

Miss Reiner, who is 5 feet 8 inches, dark hair and seems mature for her age, lived with Mexican-American families in three different California towns. She earned a total of $100 for her summer’s labors, plus a $200 bonus free farm union when she returned to school.

"I expected to live in a shack with no electricity and no running water," she said. "Many of the workers live that way. But instead, all of her families had things like refrigerators, hair dryers, record players, ovens, and wall-to-wall carpeting. I was really shocked. I thought they might become too materialistic.

Laurel was one of only two union organizers working out of a storefront strike headquarters in San Juan Bautista, Calif., when she first met Mr. Chavez, who led the union’s well-publicized grape and lettuce boycotts. He asked her to move to the union’s headquarters in Los Angeles, Calif., to write "Spanish propaganda," but other union members convinced her that she was better suited where she was.

During her stay in San Ysidro, laurel met the Rev. Victor Salandini, the 43-year-old Roman Catholic priest and union supporter who celebrated masses on an evening for striking farm workers, using corn cobs as communion bread. Father Salandini, dubbed "the tortilla priest," was suspended and later reinstated for his activities by the Most Rev. Leo T. Maher, Bishop of the San Diego Catholic Diocese.

Laurel, who describes herself as a "conservative reformer," was inspired for her summer work stay on a kibbutz in Israel in 1965. She has also worked with Indians and other minority groups as part of the National Ethical Culture Society program in Tucson, Ariz.

She was that she was often encountered male chauvinism, or, in this case, farm workers and union leaders, on the Farm Workers’ Round Table: "There were daily machismo confrontations," she said. "The men would come up and say, ‘Am not you going to fix me something to eat?’ It was infuriating, because many of the best strike organizers are women. One guy asked me to make him breakfast. I showed him how to cook two eggs. It’s unbelievable how dependent they are on women.”

"One 20-year-old Chicano, who was very mad as I just assumed as I went on. ‘He was always giving me the same thing. He said that he couldn’t imagine working with an all-Chicanos group, and I think the reason was because there were no others in the group that had never done anything bad in their life, and that’s why they were working for the Farm Workers.”

But despite the resentment, it was not uncommon, Laurel said, for the male union members, married or single, to ask her, "Well, how am I doing? Do you think I’m doing well in school?"

"There’s just too much happening, and too much to be done," she declared. "But no one ever said you get out and experience something. I won’t consider that really learning.”