

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

By JUDY KLEMESRUD

If somebody held a sweepstakes for the most interesting What I Did On My Summer Vacation story, Laurel Reiner of Ossining, N. Y., might rank right up there near the top.

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

mittee 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 "stoop" laborers on California farms, drove injured workers to medical clinics, wrote what she calls "Spanish propaganda," survived verbal confrontations with chauvinistic male union members, raised \$385 for a station wagon for the union, and marched in Huelga (strike) parades.

Knowing the People

"I consider it learning through action," Laurel said recently in her mother's comfortable home on Cedar Lane in Ossining. "That's the most important thing. I don't see how people can be educated just by sitting down 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 spring after she became bored with her classes at the private, progressive Scarborough School, in Scarborough-on-Hudson, N. Y.

"There was so much apathy," she said, "I just couldn't take it any more."

Since she is fluent in Spanish (her father, Albert, teaches romance languages at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pa.) she devised an independent work-study project in which she would get academic credit for working with the Farm Workers, keeping a running journal of her activities instead of writing the usual senior term paper.

The headmaster approved of her plan, and Laurel, armed with \$365 from her mother, Gladys, flew to California shortly after Easter. She worked for the union from April 19 through Aug. 1, and received her high school diploma in absentia.

Miss Reiner, who has long 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 from the union when she returned East.

"I expected to live in a shack with no electricity and



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

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

She was one of only two union organizers working out of a storefront strike headquarters in San Ysidro, 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 La Paz, 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 ironing board for striking farm workers, using corn tortillas as communion bread. Father Salandini, dubbed "the tortilla priest," was suspended and later reinstated for his ac-

tivities by the Most Rev. Leo T. Maher, Bishop of the San Diego Catholic Diocese.

Laurel, who described herself as "a nonviolent reformer," was inspired for her summer job by a two-month stay on a kibbutz in Israel in 1969. She has also worked with Indians and other minority groups as part of an Ethical Culture Society program in Tucson, Ariz.

She said that she often encountered male chauvinism, or, in this case, "machismo," on the Farm Workers job.

"There were daily machismo confrontations," she said. "The men would come up and say, 'Aren't 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, so 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 macho, just seemed to resent me," she went on. "He was always giving me a hard time. He said that he couldn't imagine what an all-A student from a middle-class family who had never done anything bad in her life would be doing 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 for dates. "Everybody in sight asks you out," she said, with a disgusted wave of her hand. "It's es-

pecially bothersome when they're married. You just picture their poor women at home with all their children. They can't escape their role, and here their husbands can be out with anybody."

Miss Reiner, whose work sometimes included contract enforcement (going into the fields to make sure that all of the workers on a union job held union cards), said she felt no sympathy for the "scabs."

Angry at 'Scabs'

"The worst thing about the scabs," she said angrily, "is that they all make their kids work. The kids never get a chance to go to school."

She said she had encountered many physical ailments among the workers, especially pesticide poisoning. "One man I worked with kept having epileptic fits," she added, "and it was my responsibility to get his medicine."

As a result of her work with the Chavez union, Laurel hopes to get a law degree and then work with the United Farm Workers. But right now, she is trying to figure out another independent work-study project (with academic credit, of course) that would take her away from Marymount College and out into the world.

"There's just too much happening, and too much to be done," she declared. "Most colleges have a four-year learning program, and unless you go out and experience something, I don't consider that really learning."

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