

Helen Serda 1965-1975

I was born in a labor camp. When my sisters and I were young, our family lived in boxcars. We had no bathrooms or running water. We used outhouses that everyone in the labor camp shared. In the very early morning, my mother carried water from the camp faucet and warmed it up for us before school. It was a very hard life. We were farmworkers. The name of the camp was DiGiorgio.

On the side of the camp with the boxcars lived all the Mexicans. On the other side lived all the white people in neat white houses with picket fences. In the middle of the camp was a swimming pool. Every day we could hear the laughter of the white kids swimming, but we could not use the pool any day except on Friday because on Saturdays the camp people cleaned the pool.

Another thing I remember about living at DiGiorgio was the big watchtower at the entrance of the labor camp. It stood high above the fields. I heard whispers that Mr. DiGiorgio had a man high above in the watchtower guarding his workers all day.

One day, our family went into Delano to visit a family friend. He lived in a beautiful house with three bedrooms and a bathroom. Later, as we were driving back to the labor camp, I asked my father, "Why don't we buy a beautiful house like your friend?" My father said, "He belongs to a union." Being young, I asked him, "Why don't you join a union so we can buy a beautiful house like your friend?" My father said, "We can't. We don't have a union."

In 1965, when the strike started, I was working at Schenley's. I heard all the noise and commotion caused by the picketers, and immediately the rancher told us to move farther away from the road. He did this so we would not be able to hear what the pickets were saying. But I saw brown faces shouting "Strike!" and I knew the time was here to fight for and organize a union.

At first, I was the only one in my family to walk out on strike. I used to picket my mom and dad while they were still working, but I felt bad picketing them, so I would stay in the car and not picket where they worked. Later, my father, Joe Serda, worked undercover signing up workers at DiGiorgio for the union. Cesar Chavez wanted my dad to stay working at DiGiorgio and give the union as much information as he could and to sign up as many workers as he could. When DiGiorgio found this out, they demoted him and made his life miserable. The pickets would yell names at my dad, not knowing he was helping the union all along. I couldn't say anything because I didn't want to blow his cover. Eventually, my mom and dad were fired for helping the union, and Cesar used them on the picket lines and sent them on the grape boycott to Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles.

When, finally, DiGorgio held elections at his farm, my father was asked by Cesar to accompany the vaulted box of ballots to San Francisco. My father remembers that he was

so scared that something would happen to him. There was so much conflict and fights going on that he felt like maybe someone might try to get rid of him and steal the box. He recalls he had a very bad sleepless night that night before the ballots were counted.

Everyone on strike suffered. We would get weekly rations of food and every Friday we would get \$5 and two packs of cigarettes. One day while I was working at the Pink House (the union office), Cesar Chavez walked in with his bodyguards and asked me for a cigarette. I thought to myself, this famous and heroic leader was asking ME for a cigarette? How I wished I would have had a cigarette to give to him.

The weekly rations of food were mostly cans of food, and those were mostly spaghetti. I remember one Thanksgiving Day, my sisters and I were all alone at home. Our parents were boycotting in Detroit, and it was Thanksgiving Day, and while everyone was celebrating with their families and had turkey, we had nothing—no food, no parents. We were hungry, so we opened a can of spaghetti and ate our Thanksgiving Day dinner.

The Chavez children suffered just as much as everyone else. They went to school in hand-me-down clothes and shoes. They ate the same cans of food as we did. Can you imagine how they must have felt being teased in high school?

I used to go to the Chavez house a lot. I wanted to see for myself how they lived. Also, I went to school with the older Chavez girls. They lived in a small wooden house. Our house at that time was even better than the Chavez house.

There were many teenagers on the picket lines. Many teenagers, like myself, did not finish high school. I dropped out because I needed clothes, and my parents did not make enough money. Some teens were expelled from Delano High School for wearing Huelga buttons. When Cesar saw us on the picket lines he encouraged us to return to school and study, as many of us could not read or write. One day, Cesar started a Huelga School. He recruited two teachers from the Bay Area to teach us how to read. One day, I was passing by the Huelga School and looked in through the window. I saw my boyfriend and a friend; they were reading “See Jane run.” I started to laugh.

Now I realize that our schools at that time were not teaching us very well. Most of the children of farmworkers ended up in the fields because of this. I went to high school, and not once did I hear the word “college.” I never even knew who my counselor was. Cesar Chavez encouraged me to return to night school and get my high school diploma. I did. I was so happy when I received my high school diploma. Cesar then wrote a letter of recommendation for me to go to a university, and I did. Cesar placed a lot of emphasis on education, even if it meant losing people on the picket lines. He would rather we were in school.

Lastly, what left an impression on me was the time we were arrested for picketing in New York. Cesar had sent a group of about 40 strikers to New York to stop the grapes. With us

was a little boy about six years old. His dad was Marcos Munoz. When we were arrested he was scared and crying. We learned that Bronx police were not very friendly. Later, the Kennedy brothers sent their lawyers to bail us out of jail.

After working with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers for ten years, my husband and I moved to Santa Paula, California. I began to work at Santa Paula High School. One day I met a man who also worked there. He told me that Cesar Chavez was a fraud and only cared about money and lived in a big beautiful house on a hilltop. His remarks made me very angry, and it was then I decided to make it my mission to talk to as many classes as I could about the real Cesar Chavez and how he suffered and how much his family suffered. Today, I speak to hundreds of students on Cesar Chavez Day. I also speak at Ventura College and Moorpark College. I tell them the real story about how the Chavez children suffered and they never once complained.