

The Story of Cesar Chavez



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THE BEGINNING

The story of Cesar Estrada Chavez begins near Yuma, Arizona. Cesar was born on March 31, 1927. He was named after his grandfather, Cesario. Regrettably, the story of Cesar Estrada Chavez also ends near Yuma, Arizona. He passed away on April 23, 1993, in San Luis, a small village near Yuma, Arizona.

He learned about justice or rather injustice early in his life. Cesar grew up in Arizona; the small adobe home, where Cesar was born was swindled from them by dishonest Anglos. Cesar's father agreed to clear eighty acres of land and in exchange he would receive the deed to forty acres of land that adjoined the home. The agreement was broken and the land sold to a man named Justus Jackson. Cesar's dad went to a lawyer who advised him to borrow money and buy the land. Later when Cesar's father could not pay the interest on the loan the lawyer bought back the land and sold it to the original owner. Cesar learned a lesson about injustice that he would never forget. Later, he would say, The love for justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being but it is also the most true to our nature.

In 1938 he and his family moved to California. He lived in La Colonia Barrio in Oxnard for a short period, returning to Arizona several months later. They returned to California in June 1939 and this time settled in San Jose. They lived in the barrio called Sal Si Puedes "Get Out If You Can." Cesar thought the only way to get out of the circle of poverty was to work his way up and send the kids to college. He and his family worked in the fields of California from Brawley to Oxnard, Atascadero, Gonzales, King City, Salinas, McFarland, Delano, Wasco, Selma, Kingsburg, and Mendota.

He did not like school as a child, probably because he spoke only Spanish at home. The teachers were mostly Anglo and only spoke English. Spanish was forbidden in school. He remembers being punished with a ruler to his knuckles for violating the rule. He also remembers that some schools were segregated and he felt that in the integrated schools he was like a monkey in a cage. He remembers having to listen to a lot of racist remarks. He remembers seeing signs that read whites only. He and his brother, Richard, attended thirtyseven schools. He felt that education had nothing to do with his farm worker/migrant way of life. In 1942 he graduated from the eighth grade. Because his father, Librado, had been in an accident and because he did not want his mother, Juana, to work in the fields, he could not to go to high school, and instead became a migrant farm worker.

While his childhood school education was not the best, later in life, education was his passion. The walls of his office in La Paz (United Farm Worker Headquarters) are lined with hundreds of books ranging from philosophy, economics, cooperatives, and unions, to biographies on Gandhi and the Kennedys'. He believed that, "The end of all education should surely be service to others," a belief that he practiced until his untimely death.

In 1944 he joined the Navy at the age of seventeen. He served two years and in addition to discrimination, he experienced strict regimentation.

In 1948 Cesar married Helen Fabela. They honeymooned in California by visiting all the California Missions from Sonoma to San Diego (again the influence of education). They settled in Delano and started their family. First Fernando, then Sylvia, then Linda, and five more children were to follow.

Cesar returned to San Jose where he met and was influenced by Father Donald McDonnell. They talked about farm workers and strikes. Cesar began reading about St. Francis and Gandhi and nonviolence. After Father McDonnell came another very influential person, Fred Ross.

Cesar became an organizer for Ross' organization, the Community Service Organization CSO. His first task was voter registration.

THE UNITED FARM WORKERS IS BORN



Copyright: Cesar R. Castillo, Coachella, 1972

In 1962 Cesar founded the National Farm Workers Association, later to become the United Farm Workers the UFW. He was joined by Dolores Huerta and the union was born. That same year Richard Chavez designed the UFW Eagle and Cesar chose the black and red colors. Cesar told the story of the birth of the eagle. He asked Richard to design the flag, but Richard could not make an eagle that he liked. Finally he sketched one on a piece of brown wrapping paper. He then squared off the wing edges so that the eagle would be easier for union members to draw on the handmade red flags that would give courage to the farm workers with their own powerful symbol. Cesar made reference to the flag by stating, "A symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride . . . When people see it they know it means dignity."

For a long time in 1962, there were very few union dues paying members. By 1970 the UFW got grape growers to accept union contracts and had effectively organized most of that industry, at one point in time claiming 50,000 dues paying members. The reason was Cesar Chavez's tireless leadership and nonviolent tactics that included the Delano grape strike, his fasts that focused national attention on farm workers problems, and the 340-mile march from Delano to Sacramento in 1966. The farm workers and supporters carried banners with the black eagle with HUELGA (strike) and VIVA LA CAUSA (Long live our cause). The marchers wanted the state government to pass laws which would permit farm workers to organize into a union and allow collective bargaining agreements. Cesar made people aware of the struggles of farm workers for better pay and safer working conditions. He succeeded through nonviolent tactics (boycotts, pickets, and strikes). Cesar Chavez and the union sought recognition of the importance and dignity of all farm workers.

It was the beginning of La Causa a cause that was supported by organized labor, religious groups, minorities, and students. Cesar Chavez had the foresight to train his union workers and then to send many of them into the cities where they were to use the boycott and picket as their weapon.

Cesar was willing to sacrifice his own life so that the union would continue and that violence was not used. Cesar fasted many times. In 1968 Cesar went on a water only, 25 day fast. He repeated the fast in 1972 for 24 days, and again in 1988, this time for 36 days. What motivated him to do this? He said, Farm workers everywhere are angry and worried that we cannot win without violence. We have proved it before through persistence, hard work, faith and willingness to sacrifice. We can win and keep our own selfrespect and build a great union that will secure the spirit of all people if we do it through a rededication and recommitment to the struggle for justice through nonviolence.

THE FAST

Many events precipitated the fast, especially the terrible suffering of the farm workers and their children, the crushing of farm worker rights, the dangers of pesticides, and the denial of fair and free elections.

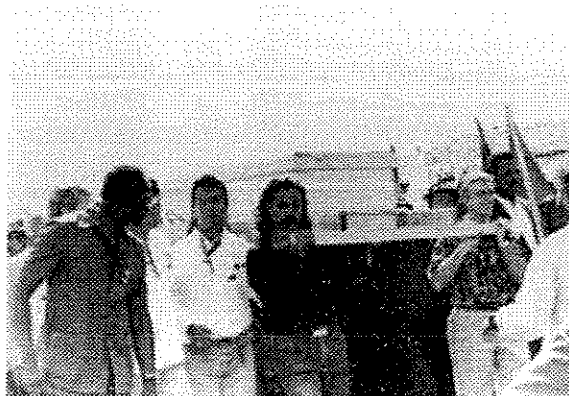
Cesar said about the fast, "A fast is first and foremost personal. It is a fast for the purification of my own body, mind, and soul. The fast is also a heartfelt prayer for purification and strengthening for all those who work beside me in the farm worker movement. The fast is also an act of penance for those in positions of moral authority and for all men and women activists who know what is right and just, who know that they could and should do more. The fast is finally a declaration of noncooperation with supermarkets who promote and sell and profit from California table grapes. During the past few years I have been studying the plague of pesticides on our land and our food," Cesar continued "The evil is far greater than even I had thought it to be, it threatens to choke out the life of our people and also the life system that supports us all. This solution to this deadly crisis will not be found in the arrogance of the powerful, but in solidarity with the weak and helpless. I pray to God that this fast will be a preparation for a multitude of simple deeds for justice. Carried out by men and women whose hearts are focused on the suffering of the poor and who yearn, with us, for a better world. Together, all things are possible."

Cesar Chavez completed his 36-day Fast for Life on August 21, 1988. The Reverend Jesse Jackson took up where Cesar left off, fasting on water for three days before passing on the fast to celebrities and leaders. The fast was passed to Martin Sheen, actor; the Reverend J. Lowery, President SCLC; Edward Olmos, actor; Emilio Estevez, actor; Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Robert Kennedy, Peter Chacon, legislator, Julie Carmen, actress; Danny Glover, actor; Carly Simon, singer; and Whoopi Goldberg, actress.

THE DEATH OF CESAR CHAVEZ

Cesar Estrada Chavez died peacefully in his sleep on April 23, 1993 near Yuma, Arizona, a short distance from the small family farm in the Gila River Valley where he was born more than 66 years before.

The founder and president of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO was in Yuma helping UFW attorneys defend the union against a lawsuit brought by Bruce Church Inc., a giant Salinas, Calif.-based lettuce and vegetable producer. Church demanded that the farm workers pay millions of dollars in damages resulting from a UFW boycott of its lettuce during the 1980's. Rather than bring the legal action in a state where the boycott actually took place, such as California or New York, Church "shopped around" for a friendly court in conservative, agribusiness-dominated Arizona where there had been no boycott activity.



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"Cesar gave his last ounce of strength defending the farm workers in this case," stated his successor, UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, who was with him in Arizona during the trial. He died standing up for their First Amendment right to speak out for themselves. He believed in his heart that the farm workers were right in boycotting Bruce Church Inc. lettuce during the 1980's and he was determined to prove that in court." (When the second multimillion dollar judgement for Church was later thrown out by an appeal's court, the company signed a UFW contract in May 1996.

After the trial recessed at about 3 p.m. on Thursday, April 22, Cesar spent part of the afternoon driving through Latino neighborhoods in Yuma that he knew as a child. Many Chavezes still live in the area.

He arrived about 6 p.m. in San Luis, Arizona about 20 miles from Yuma, at the modest concrete block home of Doña Maria Hau, a former farm worker and longtime friend. Cesar and eight other UFW leaders and staff were staying at her house in a poor farm worker neighborhood not far from the Mexican border.

Cesar ate dinner at around 9 p.m. and presided over a brief meeting to review the day's events. He had just finished two days of often grueling examination by attorneys for Bruce Church Inc.

He talked to his colleagues about taking care of themselves a recent recurring theme with Cesar because he was well aware of the long hours required from him and other union officers and staff. Still, he was in good spirits despite being exhausted after prolonged questioning on the witness stand; he complained about feeling some weakness when doing his evening exercises.

The UFW founder went to bed at about 10 or 10:30 p.m. A union staff member said he later saw a reading light shining from Cesar's room.

The light was still on at 6 a.m. the next morning. That was not seen as unusual. Cesar usually woke up in the early hours of the morning well before dawn to read, write or meditate.

When he had not come out by 9 a.m., his colleagues entered his bedroom found that Cesar had died apparently, according to authorities, at night in his sleep.

He was found lying on his back with his head turned to the left. His shoes were off and he still wore his clothes from the day before. In his right hand was a book on Native American crafts. There was a peaceful smile on his face.

THE LAST MARCH WITH CESAR CHAVEZ

On April 29, 1993, Cesar Estrada Chavez was honored in death by those he led in life. More than 50,000 mourners came to honor the charismatic labor leader at the site of his first public fast in 1968 and his last in 1988, the United Farm Workers Delano Field Office at "Forty Acres."

It was the largest funeral of any labor leader in the history of the U.S. They came in caravans from Florida to California to pay respect to a man whose strength was in his simplicity.

Farm workers, family members, friends and union staff took turns standing vigil over the plain pine coffin which held the body of Cesar Chavez. Among the honor guard were many celebrities who had supported Chavez throughout his years of struggle to better the lot of farmworkers throughout America.

Many of the mourners had marched side by side with Chavez during his tumultuous years in the vineyards and farms of America. For the last time, they came to march by the side of the man who had taught them to stand up for their rights, through nonviolent protest and collective bargaining.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney, who celebrated the funeral mass, called Chavez "a special prophet for the worlds' farm workers." Pall bearers, including crews of these workers, Chavez children and grandchildren, then carried their fallen leader, resting at last, from the Memorial Park to Forty Acres.

The death of Chavez marked an era of dramatic changes in American agriculture. His contributions would be eroded, and others would have to shoulder the burden of his work. But, Cesar Chavez, who insisted that those who labor in the earth were entitled to share fairly in the rewards of their toil, would never be forgotten.

As Luis Valdez said, "Cesar, we have come to plant your heart like a seed . . . the farm workers shall harvest in the seed of your memory."

FINAL RESTING PLACE/FINAL RECOGNITION

The body of Cesar Chavez was taken to La Paz, the UFW's California headquarters, by his family and UFW leadership. He was laid to rest near a bed of roses, in front of his office.

On August 8, 1994, at a White House ceremony, Helen Chavez, Cesar's widow, accepted the Medal of Freedom for her late husband from President Clinton. In the citation accompanying America's highest civilian honor which was awarded posthumously, the President lauded Chavez for having "faced formidable, often violent opposition with dignity and nonviolence.

And he was victorious. Cesar Chavez left our world better than he found it, and his legacy inspires us still. He was for his own people a Moses figure," the President declared. "The farm workers who labored in the fields and yearned for respect and selfsufficiency pinned their hopes on this remarkable man who, with faith and discipline, soft spoken humility and amazing inner strength, led a very courageous life"

The citation accompanying the award noted how Chavez was a farm worker from childhood who "possessed a deep personal understanding of the plight of migrant workers, and he labored all his years to lift their lives." During his lifetime, Chavez never earned more than \$5,000 a year. The late Senator Robert Kennedy called him "one of the heroic figures of our time."

Chavez's successor, UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, thanked the president on behalf of the United Farm Workers and said, "Every day in California and in other states where farm workers are organizing, Cesar Chavez lives in their hearts. Cesar lives wherever Americans' he inspired work nonviolently for social change."

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Stone Soup for the World

By Giving Our Lives, We Find Life

Storyteller: Marc Grossman

For the migrant farm worker, each day was endless; each night he was exhausted and often hungry. His life stood in stunning contrast to the comfortable lives of families who savored the fruits of his labor. In a land that promised plenty, migrant farm workers in the 1960s had no voice, no rights, and no protections. Cesar Chavez knew their troubles firsthand. Once a migrant farm worker, he was small, soft-spoken, and low key; a guy you could easily lose in a crowd. But this gentle giant woke up the drowsy conscience of the most powerful country in the world.

For years, Americans had brought home sweet, plump clusters of table grapes without a second thought. By the late 1960s, Cesar Chavez had turned the decision of whether or not to buy grapes into a powerful political act. This quiet man with dark Indian features had changed the ordinary act of buying groceries into an opportunity to help others by exercising the power of socially responsible buying habits.

Farm workers had been trying to organize a union for more than one hundred years. In 1965 they began a bitter five-year strike against grape growers around Delano, California. Two and one-half years later, in the hungry winter of 1968 with no resolution in sight, they were tired and frustrated.

Cesar had already decided to ask for help. He believed that if people in communities throughout the nation knew about the needless suffering of farm workers, they would rise to the occasion and do what they could to help. Taking a bold leap of faith, Cesar invited consumers to join in solidarity with his United Farm Workers (UFW). He asked them to send a message to the grape growers by boycotting California table grapes. The boycott began slowly, but built steadily over the next couple of years. First California, then the rest of the nation, and even Canada joined in support of the strikers.

In the meantime some of the strikers had become impatient. Among some of them, particularly some of the young men, there began the murmurs of violence; some wanted to strike back at those who had abused them and their families. By fighting back, they thought they could prove their machismo, their manliness. But Cesar rejected that part of our culture "that tells young men that you're not a man if you don't fight back." The boycott had followed in the tradition of Cesar's hero, Mahatma Gandhi, whose practice of militant nonviolence he embraced. And now, like Gandhi, Cesar announced that he would undertake a fast as an act of penitence and as a way of taking responsibility as a leader for his people.

The fast divided the UFW staff. Many didn't understand why Cesar was doing it. Others worried about his health. But the farm workers understood. A mass was said nightly near where Cesar was fasting at the Forty Acres, the UFW's headquarters in Delano. Hundreds, then thousands, came. People pitched tents nearby. They brought religious offerings: pictures and small statues. Farm workers waited in line for hours to speak with Cesar in his tiny room, while he refused interviews with reporters.

After twenty-five days, Cesar was carried to a nearby park where the fast ended during a mass with thousands of farm workers. He had lost thirty-five pounds, but there was no more talk of violence among the farm workers. Cesar's message had gotten through. Senator Robert Kennedy came to the mass, he said, "out of respect for one of the heroic figures of our time."

Cesar was too weak to speak, so his statement was read by others in both English and Spanish. "It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life," they read. "The truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggles for justice. To

be a man is to suffer for others.  help us to be men." 

Cesar's efforts connected middle-class families in northeastern cities and midwestern suburbs with poor families in the hot California vineyards. Motivated by compassion, millions of people across North America stopped eating the grapes they had loved so much. At dinner tables across the country, parents gave their children a simple, powerful lesson in social justice by reaching out to those less fortunate than themselves. By 1970, the grape boycott was an unqualified success. Bowing to pressure from the boycott, grape growers at long last signed union contracts, granting workers human dignity and a more livable wage.

In the years that followed, Cesar continued to use strikes, boycotts, marches and fasts to help farm workers stand up for their rights and to gather support from ordinary Americans to aid them in their efforts. In 1988, at the age of sixty-one, Cesar undertook his last public fast, this time for thirty-six days, to draw attention to the pesticide poisoning of farm workers and their children.

By the values many use to measure success in the 1990s, Cesar Chavez was not very successful. He had been forced to quit school after the eighth grade to help his family. He never owned a house. He never earned more than six thousand dollars a year. When he died in 1993, at age sixty-six, he left no money for his family. Yet more than forty thousand people marched behind the plain pine casket at his funeral, honoring the more than forty years he spent struggling to improve the lives of farm workers.

An all-night vigil was held under a giant tent before Cesar's funeral at Forty Acres, where his body lay in an open casket. Thousands and thousands of people filed by until morning. Parents carried newborn babies and sleeping toddlers in their arms. One farm worker explained, "I wanted to tell my children how they had once been in the presence of this great man."

What was the secret behind such a remarkable display? A reporter once asked Cesar, "What accounts for all the affection and respect so many farm workers show you in public?" Cesar just looked down and smiled his easy smile. "The feeling is mutual," was his simple reply.

Stone Soup for the World

<http://www.soup4world.com/cesar-chavez.htm>

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