

MY LIFE AS A FARMWORKER IN THE 1960S

It was March 18, 1966, and I was at work at the small two-room office for the local Farm Workers Organization. I was fifteen years old and I knew I was missing out on a momentous occasion.

Just a few miles away, I knew that my father, Jesus Marin Barrera, and the local National Farm Workers Association ("NFWA") members were waiting for the marchers/peregrinos to show up in Porterville.

The marchers or peregrinos had left Delano the day before and were on their way to Sacramento, a march of more than 300 miles which was designed to protest the plight of the farm workers and to bring national attention to the miserable working conditions of the farm workers which existed at the time. My father was the president of the local Farm Workers Union and they were at the entrance to the city waiting for the marchers to arrive. The plan was to brazenly march down Main Street and go to a local park, Murray Park, where a rally would be held to be followed by each of the local NFWA members taking home one or more of the marchers/peregrinos.

Although my father had requested a parade permit, the City of Porterville had refused to issue it and had advised my father that anyone who marched would be arrested. So, my father had

strenuously forbade me from joining them. He did not want to see me in jail.

I did not often disobey my father but I knew that if I didn't disobey him, I would regret it. I thought about it long and hard and then made the decision, I would join the marchers. I knew my father would eventually forgive me. Plus, I justified my decision by saying, "What if my father needs me!" My father did not speak English and I was in many ways his personal "secretaria". I was his right hand person- translating the newspaper for him, interpreting when he needed to communicate with English speakers such as City Hall officials and the police.

So, I left the office and joined the marchers as they entered Porterville. What a glorious event it was. My father played the accordion; my uncle Jose Raul Barrera played the guitar and my other uncle, my Mom's brother, Gilberto Garza, played the drums as we marched to the park where we had a rally. There was music, food, wonderful company and many cries of Viva la Huelga and Viva la Causa and Viva Cesar Chavez.

Oh, and none of us were arrested. I guess the Porterville jail could not hold so many people.

My name is Yolanda Barrera and I grew up in Porterville, California, in the 1960s. I was a farmworker.

We arrived in Porterville from Mission, Texas, on March 5, 1961. My family came to Porterville because the factory where my parents worked in Mission, Texas, closed down and they had no means to support themselves and us, the children. So, they went to Porterville where according to rumors, work was plentiful.

My parents became farm workers, picking various fruits- grapes, oranges, grapefruits, lemons, tomatoes, plums, apricots, pears, olives, and peaches. They earned \$1.00 an hour which was the minimum wage and they considered themselves lucky to be able to work.

When we arrived from Texas, there were five of us, my parents, my brother Marin, my sister Annie and me. We lived in a one room studio which had only one bed. So, my parents slept on the bed and we, the three children, slept on the floor. I was 10 years old. When we arrived, I saw my parents go out looking for work and they would return home very sad- unable to find work. I could see the worry lines deepening before me.

A few days later, my siblings and I arrived home from school to find that our parents were not home. I was so excited because I knew that meant they had found a job. An hour later, they came home. My mother's beautiful face which was always a translucent white was covered with dirt, sweat and pesticide residue. My mother's arms which were always very elegant looking- long, thin with beautiful, long nails, were covered with scratches and caked

blood and all her nails were broken and jagged. My father, the strong man whom I always looked up to appeared stooped and looked exhausted like I'd never seen him before.

Things would become worse rather than better in short order. Most of the work around Porterville was not hourly, it was piece rate. Piece rate is a system where the worker gets paid for the number of boxes he fills with fruit. The faster he works, the more money he'll earn. While this sounds "fair" it is a ruthless system design to tilt the scales in favor of the grower. The pay per box is so minimal that it is difficult to even achieve the minimum wage. Oftentimes, the worker drives himself unmercifully even to the point of physical exhaustion, heat stroke and injury. This system is also designed so that all family members must work for the family to survive.

My parents did not know how to pick fruit and while it is not a complicated process, it is a painful learning experience. They had to learn to balance and carry a heavy wooden ladder on their shoulder as they walked from one set of trees to the other all day long. They had to learn where to place the ladder on the tree to maximum their ability to reach the oranges and not break any of the branches. Breaking branches meant they were fired. They had to fill a back-pack type of bag worn in the front called a MORRAL. The oranges could not be pulled from the trees; they had to be cut with special scissors which the workers had to

provide on their own. Pulling oranges would result in being fired.

Each bin of oranges was paid at \$5.00 a bin. At the end of the day, if my parents were lucky, they made a bin between both of them. That came out to considerably less than the minimum wage of \$1.00 an hour.

My parents quickly realized that they would not survive and so the children had to help. Every weekend, every holiday and all summer, we joined our parents in the fields. When other children at school would say, "Yea, it's Friday" and they looked forward to the weekend, we would groan inwardly because it meant we'd have to get up at 4:30 a.m., drive to an orchard and work all day picking fruit. It was hard work with very little pay but we had no choice.

We had to be ready to start working as soon as the sun rose. We would all sit in the car at the orchard-- waiting. At first, I could not figure out why this was necessary but I soon learned that it was "first-come, first serve". Once all the ladders were given out to the workers, all other prospective workers were sent home- no work. The adults climbed the ladder and picked the oranges in the top part of the tree. The other workers, usually the children, picked the oranges in the bottom half of the tree. Each family was assigned a "set" which is comprised of 4 or sometimes 6 orange trees. As the fruit of one set was picked,

the family moved to the next set which could be a block away depending on the workers. The boxes were marked with the family name. The contractor would examine the "set" to make sure no oranges remained on the trees and that the oranges in the boxes were not rotten and to ensure that the oranges had not been "pulled" by hand rather than cut with the scissors. A breach of any of these meant the family would be fired.

Working in the fields was painful and physically exhausting and the pay was horrendously low. We barely survived. But, the worst part was the treatment at the hands of the contractors and the owners. We were not provided with basic necessities. There were no breaks provided so from the moment we arrived to when we left, it was work, work, work. There was the constant threat that you would be fired- if you broke a branch, if you pulled the orange, if you left oranges in the trees, if you didn't keep up with the other workers, if you got there late, if you tried to leave early.

Worse yet was the lack of basic necessities like water and toilets. Generally water was not provided but if it was, it was a barrel with only one rusted dipper which everyone had to use. While we could take our own water, we had to keep carrying it. After a while, carrying the ladder, carrying our lunch, carrying the bag for the oranges and the water all became quite difficult and cumbersome. We'd run out of water quickly due to the profuse

sweating and the unmerciful sun beating down on us. At times, we felt we were going to pass out.

And the toilets!!!! there were none. You had to take your own toilet paper and when the urge hit you, you had to run to a place in the orchard where someone could not see you and stoop and do your business. It was embarrassing and demeaning and I felt sub-human.

But working in the fields was not all bad- in fact, while it sounds dismal, it was also fun.

We hated to work weekends rather than relaxing or going swimming or enjoying being children, but on the other hand, all of our friends were working as well. So, going to work meant seeing our friends although there was no time for "fun and games" until the work was completed at the end of the day. At times, we got really lucky and we would get a "set" next to a friend and while we picked oranges, we could talk to each other. Sometimes we got really lucky and got to pick oranges next to the cutest guy in the field and we would work really hard to impress him with what a good worker we were.

Then there was the song and laughter. While working in the fields everyone sang, whether you were good at it or not. I learned so many songs from working in the field. People wouldn't just sing quietly, they would belt out the songs. Those who were really good singers would get requests from the others to sing

certain songs and people would sing along- although everyone kept working while they sang, of course.

Plus, because the family worked together on the same set, we all became extremely close. We depended on each other. My dad would impose a quota of how many boxes we had to make before we could go home. Once we started getting close to the number, we would urge each other on. We got to know each other and our parents because we could talk to each other all day long. Frankly, other than singing, there wasn't anything else we could do except talk to each other.

Sometimes, however, tragic things happened in the fields. I'll never forget the day a little boy who lived next door to us was killed in the field when his head was crushed by a tractor who backed up with a bin of oranges and did not see the child. There was no child care for the children of farm workers so everyone took their children to work even if they were too young to work. At least, the mothers could keep an eye on them. In that case, the child was sleeping in a crate and woke up and wandered off. Before his mother saw him, he was killed. It was such a tragic death and it affected us all very much.

We learned very important lessons by working in the fields. We learned that working hard is necessary for the survival of a family. We learned that a family cannot survive without the help of each member of such family. Even young children can help. My

sister Annie was only five years old when she helped to pick oranges. She would pick up the oranges which were accidentally dropped in the middle of the tree and put them in a box.

Although we worked hard and worked every chance we could, it still wasn't enough money to survive. So, my parents decided we would go to labor camps for the summer-Vernalis and Yuba City.

Vernalis was a labor camp close to Modesto, California. We worked in the tomato harvesting machines and later picking apricots. On the tomato harvesting machines, we earned the incredible sum of \$1.75 an hour. We thought we would become rich. There were four of us who could work, my parents and my brother, age 13, and me, age 15. Yes, we lied about our ages to be able to work. We worked 10 hours a day and earned an incredible \$17.50 a day. The work was extremely hard because the machine would bring up the entire plant with the tomatoes. We, the workers, would stand in a row facing a conveyor belt. There were seven of us. The plant would come up on the conveyor belt and our job was to get rid of the plant, the rocks, the dirt, the leaves and any rotten tomatoes and only allow the "good" tomatoes to make it to the end of the conveyor belt where they would drop to a bin. We would stand all day long and it was backbreaking work.

At the end of the work day, we were physically exhausted and every muscle ached. We were barely able to walk. But when we

got to the labor camp, suddenly the sight of everyone arriving from work would re-energize us. There were always so many people outside enjoying nature and enjoying each other's company. We would find things to amuse us. We'd play baseball; we'd play bingo. The younger kids would play leapfrog. The teenagers like me would go to a place to listen to music on a small record player which I'd won for being the outstanding student in junior high. The only record we had was "Wooley Bully" and "Hang on Sloopy". So, every day, that's what we listened to and danced to.

Every day was a day of fun and I still have wonderful memories of those days. As my cousin Toni would say, we had "Clean fun!". We felt good about being there primarily because we knew that we were helping our families to survive.

From Vernalis, we went to another labor camp in Yuba City to pick pears and later plums. It was very hard work- particularly picking pears because the trees were very high and we had to put double extensions on the ladders to be able to pick the pears on the trees. After a few hours, the ladders which were generally wood would begin to dig deep into our shoulder and we would feel serious pain and then numbness.

In Yuba City, my aunt and uncle and cousins joined us and we picked plums and pears. We all lived in the same room- my aunt and cousins were 8 in the family and we were 6. We would get up

in the early morning hours, before dawn, and all of us would go pick plums. We looked forward to Sunday when we would go to church. We loved going to church because it was the only time we did not have to work!

We did that for two summers, 1965 and 1966, and then my father decided not to go for the summer but rather to stay in Porterville. That was the most boring summer ever. We had been looking forward to going to the labor camps. We'd been corresponding with our labor camp friends who came from Texas, Colorado, Arizona and different parts of California and we met up there. Instead we stayed in Porterville and picked tomatoes.

I still don't know why we stopped going to the labor camps. I think my father felt that I was going to run off with a field worker. I don't think I would have done that but other girls did so I guess he had cause for alarm.

Right before school started, we would pick olives. By the time school started in September, our bodies would be a mess. Our knees would be black and blue from the kneeling to pick plums and our hands and nails would be green/yellow from picking olives. I **volunteered** to wear dresses with the hem below my knees- the best way to hide my bruises.

Then we'd start school and find out our friends looked just as bad as we did.

Because our family was a farm worker family, we had no money to spare. When school started, my mother would buy me five dresses, one for each day of the week and one pair of shoes. That was it for the year. I had to take care of my clothes because there wouldn't be any others for another year.

Being poor made us very creative. Because my parents picked tomatoes, the owner of the field would allow them to take home tomatoes for the family to eat. After a while, we'd have a lot of tomatoes sitting around the house. But, believe me, none of them went to waste. I loved eating tomatoes and I still do.

The ice cream man used to come around our neighborhood every day with the tantalizing music announcing his presence. My brother, sister and I did not have money to buy an ice cream bar. So, I thought I'd try something. I stopped the ice cream man and asked him if we could barter. He asked what I had in mind and I traded three tomatoes for each ice cream bar. My siblings were overjoyed and they were grateful for my bartering skills. After that, the ice cream man would stop at our house every day and after tomatoes, we traded oranges and then the fruit of the season.

Being poor also brought out talents we didn't know we had. As I got older, I wanted to wear nicer clothes than those that my Mom could afford to buy us. If it was a bad year, we'd get the clothes from the thrift stores. So, I learned how to sew. I got

really good at it and was able to make even fancy clothes for myself and my sister. I think we were the best dressed farm worker kids in Porterville.

By the time I was in high school, I had met a lot of college students who worked in Delano with Cesar Chavez. I'd never met a college person before then and I'd always imagined that they would be studious-looking and very boring. But, I met students from UC Berkeley and other universities and colleges and they were all so young, so talented, so amazing. They cared about La Causa and they worked very hard to improve the lot of the farm workers. I decided that I also would go to college and join the ranks of these amazing human beings.

Given my status as a farmworker child, it was difficult to be the excellent student I needed to be to go to college. I attended school and immediately afterwards I worked. When I was 13 and 14, I worked as a secretary in the Farm Workers' Union office. Later, when I was 15-18, I worked as a bookkeeper for four hours after school. On the weekends, I worked side by side with my parents and my siblings in the fields. During the summers, we worked every day to earn enough to survive the winter months.

Yet, I managed to get good grades. But I knew that my self-motivation was not enough. I had to figure out how to make my dream of going to college a reality. One of the college students

told me that even though my parents had no money for college, I could apply for financial aid and get loans, grants and work study. She suggested I speak to my counselor at the high school.

So, I went to my counselor only to find out that he did not think I should go to college. He pointed to a series of obstacles as to why I shouldn't go to college. He said, "You know your parents don't have any money?" I told him I'd heard there was financial aid available. His response was, "That is a lie. If there was something like that, don't you think I would know about it?" When I insisted that I could go and work, he told me that he knew many fine Mexican-American youths you'd gone to college and "gone crazy" and he cared too much about me to allow that to happen. He refused to give me any information about how to apply to college. I pointed out to him that notwithstanding my poverty, I was number 3 in a class of over 545 students. He wouldn't budge.

This may sound strange now because there are so many ways to find out about college. Now everything is available on-line. In those days, however, there were no computers. And, I didn't personally know anyone who had gone to college or knew how I could go to college.

Speaking to my counselor wasn't working, so, I decided I would go to the library and get names and addresses of every politician who might be able to help me. I wrote to Assemblymen,

Congressmen, and others. I thought that would work.....but it didn't. They all sent me form letters thanking me for my interest in Government and they sent me books of the running of Government. I was so frustrated. It looked like my dream would not happen.

Finally, a college student told me to just write to any college and put down the city and the letter would get to the admissions office. So, I did that and lo and behold, I received correspondence from the colleges. I was amazed it had worked. There was only one college I wanted to attend and that was San Jose State University because someone had told me it was a teacher's college and at that time I wanted to be a teacher.

It came time to send the transcripts and unfortunately I needed my counselor's signature for that to happen. You guessed it! He refused to approve the sending of the transcripts. I was shocked!!!!

In my frustration, I almost convinced myself that maybe my counselor was right; maybe I should take his advice and be a hair dresser as he suggested. I thought that wouldn't be so bad---- I'd look good all the time.

Then, I got a brilliant idea. I went to the Dean of Women and told her what was going on. She was furious with my counselor and she immediately signed the transcript request.

Unfortunately, it was too late. I received a letter from San

Jose State advising me that the transcripts were late, my file was incomplete and I would not be accepted.

I was beaten!!! I would need to become a cosmetologist after all.

One day, I was at a union meeting and Cesar Chavez came up to me- yes, me, a nobody....and he told me that he had heard that I wanted to go to San Jose State but I'd had problems with the transcripts and I would not be accepted. He told me that he could get me in if I wanted to go. If I wanted to go???? I heard angels flying around me and I heard celestial music.....Of course, I wanted to go.

I don't know what he did but before I knew it, poof, I was admitted to San Jose State.

But it wasn't enough that I was going to college. I wanted to make sure that others at my high school, particularly my siblings did not go through what happened with me.

I spoke to the principal at my high school and suggested that we have a community meeting so that the high school could demonstrate to the community that it cared about them and their opinions. I promised him I would have a huge contingent of community people. I could deliver this because I was very involved in community work at the time. Although I was only 17 years old, I was on the California Rural Legal Assistance ("CRLA") advisory board. I was working as a community worker at

Woodville Labor Camp. I was on the supervisory committee for the El Futuro Credit Union. I was on the board of the El Futuro, a civic organization. I was president of Los Camaradas, a youth group in the community and I worked with the United Farm Workers. More importantly, my father who was very involved with union activities knew everyone in town. As a side note, you're probably wondering how I had so much time to be on so many boards.....that's what happens when you're not allowed to date!!! I'd joined these community organizations since I was 13-14 years old. I always appeared older and no one questioned my presence at these adult group meetings. In fact, I was usually called upon to be the individual to organize marches against City Hall or lead a protest. Many years later when I went to law school, my father told some of his friends and United Farm Workers associates that I was attending law school and the response was, "You mean she wasn't an attorney when she lived here?"

Anyway, back at the meeting, I gave testimony against the counselor and I told the community members about what had happened. I told them that I had been an honor student all my life. I'd gotten 3 of the 4 awards given to graduating sixth graders at John J. Doyle Elementary School and I'd received the prestigious Outstanding Student Award, at Pioneer Junior High, I was on student counsel and I'd received the Outstanding Student

Award. In high school, I worked four hours after school all through high school and I was involved in many boards and yet I was still an A student. Further, I'd been selected as the Girl State Representative for our school. I related to them what my counselor had told me and how he had derailed my plans to go to college and I asked, "If that happened to me, imagine what is happening to your children at that school." The community was in an uproar.

After that incident, the community became much more involved in the school. So, something very positive came of that negative experience.

After overcoming this major obstacle, I thought it would be smooth sailing. But, it wasn't- not yet. I started to make plans to go to college but then my father decided he didn't want me to go away to college. We had major fights. He valued education but he didn't want me to leave home so he wanted me to go to the local college, Porterville Junior College.

I was confused because my father always stressed education. Although he had never attended school in the United States, my father constantly lectured us about the value of education. So, when I wanted to go to college, I thought he would be thrilled. He wasn't. His preoccupation was my reputation, "What are people going to say? They will think you have gone away because you were pregnant." I told him I didn't care what people said and his

response was, "That's fine for you but we care; we live in this town."

Finally, he threatened me with the ultimate weapon in his arsenal, "if you go away, I will disown you." I always thought only rich folks were disowned and then I realized that he could do that to me- he could cut me off from my family. But, I couldn't back down. I'd gone too far and ultimately I went to college....and ultimately, my father forgave me.

It was September, 1969, and I was going to college.....I couldn't be happier.

But the obstacle of going to college was nothing compared with staying in college. Because of my late admission, I was unable to obtain financial aid. Fortunately I'd received some scholarships through my high school so they paid for my tuition and my housing in the dorms but half way through the school year, I saw that I would not have enough money to make it through the year. I couldn't turn to my parents. Fortunately, I was able to get a job as a secretary in the EOP office. Thanks to that job, I was able to survive until the end of the school year.

My younger siblings, Marin and Annie, also attended San Jose State. Yes, I talked them into it. And yes, I became their mentor.

I wonder how differently my life would be today but for the fortuity of having met Cesar Chavez and his intervention.

I actually met Cesar Chavez through my father.

My father, under the direction of Jim Drake from the Migrant Ministry, had started a Farm Worker Organization, to seek better living conditions for farm workers. I worked in the office and we sold gas, oil and tires to the members at incredibly low prices.

Jim Drake had spoken to the Farm Workers Organization and suggested that they speak to Cesar Chavez who had a Farm Workers Organization in Delano and he was attempting to unionize workers seeking better working conditions. The Porterville group agreed to meet him.

Cesar Chavez spoke to them and the members unanimously agreed to join with the Delano group. The local group, however, would maintain its autonomy and my father would continue to be the president of the local FWO.

Slowly, our lives changed. We became more and more involved in union activities. When the Filipino and the Mexican farm workers in Delano walked out of the grape fields 1965, we became particularly involved in the union activities. My parents worked picking fruits and then in the afternoon, they would travel to Delano (about 30 miles distance from Porterville) and join the picket line- urging the workers to walk out and to respect the union and not to be scabs.

On the weekends, our entire family, extended family and

friends all participated in the picket line and other events hosted by the United Farm Workers in Delano.

In Porterville we would also host various fund raisers for the striker families who had walked out of the grape fields and now were suffering without any money for food, clothes and rent. We would sell baked goods; we would have dances; we would collect money from those members who were working.

After school and on weekends (after work), our entire family picketed the local stores who were selling the scab grapes.

And then there were the Friday evening meetings at the Filipino Hall in Delano. My father would organize car caravans to save on gas money and we would all pile into the cars and travel to Delano to attend the meetings so we would know what was going on with the United Farm Workers and so that we could turn in the money, the food, and clothing we collected for the strikers.

At these meetings, often there were politicians and other significant historical persons who wanted to speak to the group. On some occasions, I interpreted at these meetings from English-Spanish and vice versa. I loved doing that even though I had no training. I still remember editorializing when I'd translate and the audience would burst out in laughter and the politician who was speaking would look at me askance since he hadn't made a joke. I'd shrug and move on.

Cesar Chavez himself would personally asked me to translate. I felt very important to be asked by Cesar himself to be the interpreter.

That's the kind of man that Cesar was. He was humble and nothing was beneath him. He could speak to anyone and that person would feel special- would feel as if the world had stopped for a split second.

Many years later, in 1993, the world did stop for a split second- the day that Cesar died.

After attending San Jose State University, I taught high school for a number of years and then returned to further my education. I attended UCLA School of Law and I have been a federal criminal defense attorney for 32 years. My brother, Marin, is a psychiatric technician supervisor at Porterville Developmental Center. My sister, Annie, is an account executive with AT&T. My youngest brother, Mario, who at age 2 ½ marched from Porterville on the road to Lindsay, is now an attorney with the Los Angeles County Alternate Defense. My oldest daughter, Veronica, attended USC School of Law and is now an attorney with the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office. We all continue to heed our father's advice to help those who are worse off than we are. We all continue to participate in community events and donate our time, energy, effort and money to worthwhile causes.

My siblings and I continue to remember the lessons we

learned from my father not the least of which is to always be proud of who we are. We were farm workers and we are proud that we were one of the best farmworkers in Porterville.

Our parents taught us to be the best at what we did, regardless of what we were doing. They taught us that education and hard work will get you where you want to go.

In doing the work I do and in giving of myself, I feel that I honor the memory of Cesar and my parents who struggled so hard to better our lives. To this day when I cannot decide on a course or I have an ethical dilemma, I say to myself, "What would my father do?"

Que Viva la Causa!