

Cesar Chavez: A “Moses figure” for farm workers

By Arthur A. Ellis

Co-op Reporter Staff Writer

Cesar Chavez founded and led the first successful farm workers’ union in United States history, the United Farm Workers of America. He worked tirelessly to improve the lives of farm workers.

Visionary Wisdom

- *“It’s ironic that those who till the soil, cultivate and harvest the fruits, vegetables and other foods that fill your tables with abundance have nothing left for themselves.”*
- *“Non-violence is hard work. It is the willingness to sacrifice. It is the patience to win.”*
- *“If you give yourself totally to the non-violent struggle for peace and justice, you also find that people give you their hearts and you will never go hungry and never be alone.”*
- *“There is a great fear of our Union... Is it so much to ask that the poorest people of the land have a measure of justice?”*
- *“God did not promise us that the world would be humane and just. He gives us the gift of life, and allows us to choose the way we will use our limited time on earth. It is an awesome opportunity.”*
- *“We are not afraid to suffer... we are ready to give up everything—even our lives—in our struggle for justice.”*
- *“To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men.”*

Cesar Estrada Chavez was born near Yuma, Arizona, on March 31, 1927. Chavez began school at age seven, finding it difficult because his teachers only spoke English. He learned from his family reading to him in Spanish. Also, Chavez learned life lessons from his mother: that violence and selfishness were wrong. His family was swindled out of their small adobe home by dishonest Anglos. So Cesar learned about injustice early in his life.

In 1938 his family moved to California, working in the fields there. In 1942 he graduated from the eighth grade and became a migrant farm worker. He could not go to high school because his father had been in an accident and did not want his mother to work in the fields. While his formal education was stifled, education was his passion. Later, he owned hundreds of books and believed that the purpose of education “should surely be service to others.”

In 1944 at the age of 17, Chavez joined the U.S. Navy and served for two years. In 1948 he married Helen Fabela. The couple settled in Delano and started their family of eight children. Chavez returned to San Jose and was influenced by Father Donald McDonnell’s discussions about farm workers and strikes. He began reading about St. Francis and Gandhi’s philosophy on nonviolence. He went to work on voter registration for the

Community Service Organization.

In 1962 Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta, later to become the United Farm Workers-. In 1970 the UFW got grape growers to accept union contracts and had effectively organized most of that industry, at one point claiming 50,000 dues-paying members. This success was due to 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.

Chavez was willing to sacrifice his own life for the cause of the union and fasted many times, the longest being a 36-day fast in 1988 that he passed on to Jesse Jackson, Martin Sheen and other celebrities. He was motivated to fast by the suffering of the farm workers, the denial of farm worker rights and free elections and the dangers of pesticides. He fasted "as a heartfelt prayer for purification and strengthening for all those who work beside me in the... movement," as "an act of penance for those in positions of moral authority" and as "a declaration of non-cooperation with supermarkets who promote and... profit from California table grapes."

Chavez died peacefully in his sleep on April 23, 1993, near Yuma, Arizona, a short distance from where he was born more than 66 years before. He was there to help UFW attorneys defend the union against a lawsuit. On April 29, 1993, Chavez was honored by the largest funeral of any labor leader in United States history. More than 50,000 mourners came to honor the charismatic labor leader in Delano. Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney, who celebrated the funeral mass, called Chavez "a special prophet for the world's farm workers."

On August 8, 1994, at a White House ceremony, Helen Chavez accepted the Medal of Freedom for her late husband from President Clinton who lauded Chavez for having "faced formidable, often violent opposition with dignity and nonviolence."

Resources:

- *The Words of Cesar Chavez* by Cesar Chavez
- "The fight in the Fields" (video)
- www.clnet.ucla.edu/research/chavez
- www.incwell.com/Biographies/Chavez
- www.lasculturas.com/aa/bio/bioCesarChavez
- www.usdreams.com/ChavezW37
- www.thinkexist.com
- www.ufw.org