

Interview with Guadalupe Gamboa
Interviewed by Anne O'Neill
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You know [according to] oral history tradition, you begin with personal stories. Well, it started with my parents. My family was a farm worker family. My parents were born in northern Mexico and were children during the time of the Mexican revolution in the early 1900s, and my father's family were small farmers in Mexico and my mother's grandfather – she was an orphan - her parents died when she was young. Her grandfather was some kind of tradesman in a little town in northern Mexico and they both came across like billions of other Mexicans during that time after the revolution - because of the hard times created by the revolution - and settled in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. They met and had a family and my father worked as a farm worker then, clearing land of mesquite trees so they could be planted in agriculture in the Rio Grande Valley and worked a lot in the orange groves and in the vegetable [fields]. Then in the late 40s there was a severe frost that killed a lot of the citrus, so a lot of people started moving out [beginning] with my brother's father.

My father's name was Arcadio Gamboa and my mother's was Martina Molina Gamboa. My father's older brother, Humacindo, and his family came to Washington in the late '40s - I believe around 1947 or 1946 – and then went back and reported that you could make a lot of money up here in the North – in El Norte. So they talked to my father and he came up with his family. Everybody used to travel with their families. We came up originally in the back of a flatbed truck. That's how people used to travel - with a canvas on top and with a bed and sideboards and then some iron framework and a canvas on top. And so I came up as a child. I don't remember the first time we came up. We came to the lower Yakima Valley at Sunnyside and the first two years we did asparagus, which was a main crop at that time. I later learned that big companies like Green Giant and Del Monte actually started sending recruiters down to the Rio Grande Valley to bring Mexicans up here because the asparagus crop was expanding and it was very labor-intensive, and they needed a lot of people for two or three months for short periods of time, working seven days a week. But we weren't recruited by the big companies. Tomás Villanueva[s] family came up working with the big companies. We worked with a small grower.

I come from a family of nine – a large family. [I had] seven sisters and one brother. The oldest five were all females and they all had to drop out of school in the fourth, fifth, sixth grade, so that they could work. That's the only way you could support a family, 'cause the wages were so low. So I was very fortunate. I was second to the youngest, and I got to go to school. Anyway, I think we worked with this asparagus farm. I was very young at that time. We lived [in] “el campo” - a little farm labor camp, and I remember playing in the dirt outside and killing ants and getting bitten by them 'cause I was too young to work. Once

I remember going with one of my sisters to pick up a paycheck and so we went to the foreman's house. [He] lived onsite in a big white house and we went inside. I had never seen such a beautiful house, because we lived in a labor camp with bare walls and holes in the walls, and here was a house with, I think it was, linoleum and painted walls, and I was just amazed at how beautiful it was. So I asked my sister, "How come they have such a nice house and we don't?"

And she said, "Oh, we have a very nice house back in Texas, you know, but we'll go back there some day," because we did have our own house in Texas. But after we left Texas, we started migrating. We never really... we never went back. So I grew up my early years going from labor camp to labor camp. We would work in Washington cutting asparagus and then go and eventually we bought our own truck. [Then we would] get [in] our truck and drive down to Oregon to Willamette Valley and pick beans and then drive down to California and pick cotton with the big companies in California during the winter and then come back in the spring and follow the same routine. So as a child I grew up going from school to school, and the first grade I think I started while I was here in Washington in the spring and I flunked the first grade 'cause I didn't know any English, and there were no programs or anything to make up for the fact that you couldn't understand what they were saying.

So anyway, like myself and our family, there were thousands of Mexican-American migrants from Texas in the early years, just working basically in the row crops – the asparagus, mainly with small growers or big packing houses, like Green Giant and Del Monte, or working in the sugar beets. At that time you had a lot of sugar beets; you had a big sugar processing plant run by U & I – Utah and Idaho Sugar Company in Toppenish. And then there was also a lot of mint – spearmint [and] peppermint that was grown and then distilled for the juices, where the oil was used to flavor candies. And then there was also hops that's used to flavor beer - [in the] hop yards. They were also picking potatoes and working in the carrots, so there were different jobs that people could do, but they pretty much all involved stooping over – very hard physical labor. There were a lot of orchards at that time, but interestingly enough, the orchard work was reserved more for the Anglo – the white farm worker. At that time, there were still a lot of white farm workers that had come from Oklahoma and Arkansas. They called them "Arkies" and "Okies" during the Dustbowl – the Depression. Some had moved on, but a lot had stayed. They were very poor, also, and they're the ones that worked in the orchards, because it was considered higher status work because you didn't have to be stooped over all day for low wages. So there was a real distinction between the Mexicans who did the stoop labor and the Anglos that did the orchard work – the pruning, the thinning, the picking. And orchard work was paid very well in comparison to today. It was done by piece-rate and people could make two, three times what the hourly wage was. So slowly, more and more Mexican workers started to

come. I remember going to school and being one of a few in my school, but it would grow year by year.

Most of the work— at least the stoop labor - was either by piece rate, like in the asparagus, or by the hour, and the wage never was more than the minimum wage. It was just the minimum wage all the time. There were no benefits and at that time farm workers didn't have any unemployment or at least, in Washington, very few social services. So people worked, pooled their resources [and] tried to save money for periods when there was no employment. And it was hard work and there were a lot of indignities, because you could be fired at any time. There were no toilets in the fields or water provided for the workers. The worker basically had no say. So that's the background – a lot of hard work [and] very low pay. If the grower didn't like the work you were doing, he wouldn't pay you and you'd be fired.

Very few people went on to college. The farm workers had their Mexican culture; Anglos had their culture and social events and there was very little mixing of the two. Most farm workers dropped out of school, like my family, and became farm workers. It was in this type of background that we first started hearing about Cesar Chavez and the organizing efforts that were going on in California.

This was in the '60s. I was just finishing high school. I think I first heard about Cesar Chavez when I was junior college, which would have been about '65, '66. At that time, it was the '60s, when the civil rights movement had started. Lyndon Johnson was president [and] the War on Poverty had begun in the Yakima Valley because it was a poor area.

So I graduated from my high school in Sunnyside, and I was one of maybe ten or fifteen Latinos, and I remember I went through from first to the eighth grade in Outlook, which was a little town out in the country. It was a little country school. I remember in the sixth grade I had a very good teacher, a guy by the name [of] Mr. Williams. [He was] kind of an oddity. He was from out of town and used to drive a Volkswagen. I had never seen a Volkswagen in my life, but they were new at that time, in the '50s. So that showed he was pretty nonconformist. I really liked him and he really took an interest in me. I remember once him talking to me after school and asking me if I was planning on going to college and [I] said, "College – what's that?" because I had no idea what it was, you know, it just wasn't in my frame of reference. So he told me what it was. The reason he was asking was because at that time they started to track kids. You would put them in the smart classes or the vocational ed classes or the classes that are more academic to prepare you for college. He counseled me about going to college. Neither my father or mother had a single day of schooling when they were growing up. My father couldn't read [or] write and my mother could read but couldn't write in Spanish. She later learned when she was in her 60s how to write. My dad especially was always talking to me about

the importance of having an education; because I hated school after I flunked the first grade. It was Anglo, hostile... But he was always telling me about the importance of going to school – that if you went to school you could get out of formwork and become a lawyer, a teacher, a doctor, and so I guess that stuck.

I didn't drop out. I kept going, and then I finally graduated and went on to junior college [at] Yakima Valley Junior College [YVC]. And it was at Yakima Valley College that I first met Tomás Villanueva, [with whom I] formed a long-term friendship and we both got involved with the United Farm Workers at the same time. He was an immigrant [but] more recent. I was born actually in Texas, in this country, and he was a recent immigrant from Mexico and had a real distinct Spanish accent, but a very smart guy. So then we met at YVC, and I started doing research on Cesar Chavez and writing papers about him. I remember going into the library and taking out *The Nation* and other leftist papers – I didn't know they were leftist at that time [laughter]... and reading about the organizing efforts and the grape boycott – well, the grape strike – and the great organizing he was doing in California. So, both Tomás and I had a very deep interest in what was going on because of the situation of our families, and farm workers in general, and our own personal experiences and growing up and being cheated and being mistreated.

So we both got hired... we were both activists – we wanted to do something; so when the War on Poverty started, I believe in 1966, we both got employed by a War on Poverty program called Operation Grassroots, whose stated object was to go around interviewing people [to] find out why they were poor, you know, and what they needed to not be poor anymore [laughter]. It was very idealistic - that we thought that people were poor because they didn't know any better or needed a little fixing-up. Then people were saying, "Oh, we're poor because we don't get paid anything and our jobs don't last very long and we don't know how to speak English – very hard problems to solve. But it was through the War on Poverty, actually, that we first made contact with the United Farm Workers of America in the person of an organizer by the name of Nick Jones – [an] Anglo organizer who had been sent from Delano to look for people who had struck a grape ranch – I believe either Giamara or DiGiorgio, one of the two. After pressure through our campaign from the union, the company had agreed to a secret-ballot election, and part of the deal was that anybody that had worked during [a] certain period of time could vote in the elections. So they had sent out organizers following the migrant stream all over the country looking for the strikers – a very, very thorough organizing campaign. [Nick] came and addressed the meeting – an antiwar on Poverty meeting. By that time both Tomás and I were pretty fed up with the War on Poverty, because they never talked about organizing workers or forming unions or forming political power - just nothing but services and stuff. So he gave a presentation at the end of a meeting which was like a real breath of fresh air. He talked about organizing and getting better wages and better working conditions in addition to looking for

the strikers – former grape workers. We talked to him afterwards, and he invited us down to California, saying there was going to be an election that summer and they needed some help.

Both Tomás and I went down there. Tomás at that time had a 1958 or 1959 Pontiac, and we took off and drove all night and got to Delano and it was pretty interesting. We arrived in Delano looking for Cesar Chavez, and in my mind, because I had been so conditioned by living in an Anglo world,, Cesar Chavez was a going to be a light-skinned, tall, debonair-looking guy in a suit, with a fancy car and having a nice, big, fancy office. So we arrived in Delano looking for such a guy, and couldn't find him and eventually got directed to a little run-down house in the barrio on the edge of town, which was the union headquarters and eventually Cesar Chavez showed up – this small, dark-skinned, Indian-looking guy with jet-black hair, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, in the middle of a bunch of workers. It was pretty amazing the first time that we saw him. Actually, the thing that made the most impact on me was... well, in addition to Cesar and his charisma, was the impact that he had obviously had on all the workers there. They were all really transformed, from the beaten-down workers in this state that lived in despair and didn't think they could do anything, and had been conditioned that they were inferior because they were farm workers... to workers that had been involved (at that time the grape strike had already occurred). They were all real fired up and determined and knew that they could win. They stuck together. It was an incredible transformation, and it had a really lasting impact on me. It showed the possibilities of what could be done.

So we were pretty much hooked after that [laughter], and we got put to work looking for people that we thought were being taken to work so that they could vote in the election. I was put in a bus, and Tomás was going to follow me, because we thought the bus might go to this farm, but it turned out that the bus went to a tomato field, instead of Giamara or DiGiorgio. But again that was very symptomatic of the union. There were no hangers-on or people that just talked. People were put to work immediately. Then the election was held, and the UFW won by a huge majority. And so we were in Delano, we met Cesar Chavez, we were involved in the organizing, [and] we took part in the weekly Friday night meetings at the Filipino community hall that the workers had, where a report was given as to what was going on and the activities. I think we were introduced as representatives/visitors from Washington State. We were treated very cordially, very gracefully, and I think we spent two weeks there.

And then we came back to Washington and by that time – as I mentioned, we were both college students. This was our summer break and by that time we had decided we wanted to do something. I finished my two years at YVC and went another quarter - the fall of '66 - and then transferred to the University of Washington in the spring of 1967. By that time the draft board was after me, because it was the height of the Vietnam War, [but] I managed to stay out of it.

Tomás was married by that time and he decided not to go on to college. His dream was to become a doctor, and he started working with the War on Poverty and then eventually left it because they weren't doing very much. He formed the first farm workers' union [and] the first farm workers' health clinic in the Yakima Valley, after much opposition from the local politicians and the local medical association. [He] also started a co-op called the United Farm Workers Co-op, that was supposed to be the base for organizing later on.

So that was the nucleus – the start of the contact and the relationship that's persisted to this day between Washington State and California. Eventually we brought Cesar Chavez down. I'm not sure if it was in the late '60s or the early '70s. But then when I went to the University of Washington in '67 – in the winter of 1967 – it was a real cultural shock for me, because I had come from a small town where there were a lot of farm workers and [where it was] rural and very dry – to come to the big city in Seattle where it was all wet and it was all Anglo. At the University of Washington I was one of among five Latino students that I knew from all [over] the state. You had de facto segregation, and to make a long story short, I got involved with the Black students, who at that time [numbered] less than thirty, and they were the vanguard, agitating and leading and organizing drives that eventually forced the University of Washington, with the help of a lot of white students, to open up and start the recruiting program. [It] became the first four-year institution in the state of Washington to start an affirmative action minority affairs [recruiting] office and to open up the doors somewhat. So the first year I was here I was pretty lonely – it was just myself, basically. By the next year, thanks largely through the efforts of the Black Student Union, about twenty-eight or so Latino students, all from farm worker backgrounds, were recruited, and started at the University of Washington, including my cousin, Erasmo Gamboa, who is now a professor at the University of Washington.

This would have been in '68, and by that time, the UFW – it wasn't called UFW at that time – it was called the National Farm Workers' Association. Anyway, Cesar Chavez's union had launched an international boycott of grapes, to put pressure on the growers that had been struck in September of 1965 to negotiate. The boycott became their main weapon and became very effective. It was very different [from] a traditional union. A traditional union would try to organize by going to an individual company and organizing the workers and then setting up a picket line and that would be it, right? And predictably, the growers would break the strike. The workers would get hungry [and] they'd go back to work. Or they would use strikebreakers and thugs and beat them up or get injunctions and throw them in jail, and that was it, because that was the way that they organized in the labor movement. What Cesar did, though, was radically different. He drew students, ministers, labor activists, [and] Chicano activists, and basically moved the strikes from the fields to the cities, following the grapes where they were sold and did the largest boycott up to that time of

grapes that became internationally recognized. He would send a combination of ministers – very educated, sophisticated people – and farm workers to the cities to launch boycotts, and their job was then to go to all the churches and unions and student organizations and activists groups everywhere and talk about the struggle and ask people to not buy grapes and ask people to boycott certain stores that sold most of the grapes, like Safeway. And that's what happened here in Seattle. They sent a couple, Dale and Jan van Pelt, [and] they were both ministers.

By that time, the farm worker kids at the University of Washington [UW] had formed an organization. Originally it was called UMAS (United Mexican-American Students), and then later we changed it to MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantile Chicanos de Aztlan), a more radical organization.

And so the van Pelts came to us and told us about the boycott and asked for our help first of all in getting the grapes off of the campus and then picketing the neighboring community and we became totally involved because we all came from that background and started picketing the HUB (the Husky union building) where they sold grapes. It became a big issue, because the Young Republicans took up the cause against, and I remember we had big debates and a lot of coverage in The Daily, especially when we started the picketing. And this was a university just the prior year that had a lot of activity – a lot of marching and stuff - and the administration office was taken over. But we were very successful. We managed to get the grapes removed from campus and [the UW was] the first university in the country to do so. And then we started picketing out in the community. So that's how a lot of us became involved.

The boycott was an excellent vehicle to get a lot of people involved – a lot of kids. This was in '68. In the summer when the students would go back [and] when we would go back to the valley during the spring break, we started picketing the Safeways all throughout central Washington and then that drew other activists, like the people involved in the War on Poverty, our parents, [etc.]. The picketing [had] a multiplier impact. At that time it was all directed just at supporting the cause and the farm-worker-led grape boycott in California; but at the same time, it was raising consciousness. And it was around that time, around the picketing, that Cesar Chavez came down – I think it was '68 or '69 for the first time - to the Yakima Valley. We requested the use of the school auditorium in one of the farm worker towns like Granger that at that time was probably majority Mexican-American, and they had initially refused, which is very rare, because they never refused anybody, but it was because it was controlled by the growers. It caused a big political flap, and they eventually had to relent and let him speak. So we kept in touch with the UFW in that fashion until 1970, when the first organizing efforts actually took place in the valley (as opposed to just supporting efforts, or a supporting role that we had been playing up to that time), [led by] a couple [of] students, Roberto Trevino and his brother, Carlos

Trevino.

The Trevinos had gone down [to the Yakima Valley]. They were all students at that time at the University of Washington and had been involved in the grape boycott and had heard all about Cesar Chavez. So when they went down, they were drinking and talking to some of their buddies, who were complaining that they were being paid very bad at this hop farm - it was in the fall- and that they were all planning to quit, so they said, "Well, instead of quitting, why don't you organize strike like they did in California? Ask for better wages." In fact, that's what they did. They asked for better wages, [and the growers] told them they could take it or leave it, so they all walked out on strike. It was a hop ranch – Yakima Chief hop ranches, and they were in the middle of harvest, where they'd cut the vines by hand and take them to a processing plant called a hopper where there's a lot of machinery, and the pods are stripped from the vine, and then they're cooked and put into bales, which are later sold for the beer. So they struck right at harvest, without any warning, so the grower was caught completely off guard. At that time, I had graduated (this was in 1970) from undergraduate [work] at the university in '68 and had started law school. I was the first Latino from a farm worker background to go to law school here in the state of Washington in '68, and I had gotten a job working in Olympia with the Secretary of State's office and so I showed up in the valley for a wedding when the strike was going on, and I never returned to my former job. I went to visit them, and then I eventually became involved and ended up directing the strikes, because what had happened was that the workers at the Yakima Chief in Granger struck, but we weren't having any impact on the employer and the workers said, "Well this is just a small operation. The main plant is in Mabton, which is about 25 miles away. Let's go there and have them go on a strike. That way we'll put more pressure on the company."

So people all left and went to Mabton and put up a picket line and everybody walked out on strike also, 'cause everybody was real upset because the wages were so low. So we set up a big picket line in front of the Yakima Chief hop ranches in Mabton and then other workers from other neighboring farms also came and asked for help, so then we sent organizers there [laughter] and eventually the hop strike spread to about fourteen or fifteen different ranches. We caught the growers by surprise and they were in the middle of harvest, which has to be done right on time; otherwise the hops lose their value.

What we started doing is that we started to negotiate with the employers right on the spot and drawing up hand-drawn contracts, which I have copies of, basically talking about increasing the wages, talking about how there was going to be no retaliation, insuring that men and women got paid the same wage – because at that time they paid the women lower, even though they were doing the same job, and guaranteeing that the workers could go back to work. But by that time, we had made contact with California, the headquarters, and let

them know there was a strike going on in the name of the farm workers' union, even though they didn't know [laughter], so they sent out the only person that was available, which was their controller, a guy by the name I think of Rudy Almuara, and so at the Yakima Chief ranch, we actually got the workers to sign authorization cards, authorizing us to act as their representative. We held out for union recognition. I think the strike lasted a week or so, going on two weeks, and they finally were forced to have a union election, which was conducted by a group of local clergy. We were there when the ballots were counted and it was a lopsided vote. It was something like 103 or 105 for and 3 against, so we were officially recognized as a bargaining representative of Yakima Chief, and the workers went back to work. So that was actually the first strike of the first organizing effort during the hop strikes. Later Delores Huerta, one of the vice-presidents and the cofounder of the union, was sent down to try to negotiate, but once the pressure was off, the employer just engaged in surface bargaining and didn't do anything. We never got anywhere. The following year, that fall, winter, and spring, all the workers that had been involved as strike leaders were blackballed and were not hired, so there was a lot of retaliation. That made people afraid to do anything, and people that had been very involved suddenly wouldn't answer the door.

That was the first phase of the organizing effort. We were very successful. We got the wages up from – I think they paid the women a dollar-twenty an hour and the men a dollar-fifty. We got the wages up to two dollars for both, which was incredible – almost doubling the wages for the women. That was very successful in terms of the economic impact, and it showed that people had a lot of power – they got organized. There was a lot of resistance. They immediately had the sheriff come down and the sheriff got involved trying to break the strike, which continues up to the present.

At one place, we were actually met by armed foremen and relatives of the grower. It was called the Patnode Ranch where we had struck. It was a joint operation where they were processing the hops for one employer, so we struck while that employer's hops were being processed, then got the wages up. And then when the other one started, we went back, but by that time they knew we were coming, so they had five or six people with shotguns pointed at the workers, actually, and when we came up they threw us out and made comments about, "If you don't get out, there's gonna be some dead beaners on the road," and we eventually ended up filing a lawsuit against the company and managed to actually get an injunction, which is very unheard of at the local court level. It was called *Garza v. Patnode*, which established pretty much that workers had the right to organize and bargain collectively, and that was big news and there's a lot of newspaper articles around that.

Then the following year, in addition to the blacklisting, the growers just freaked out and started through the Farm Bureau (the same people that we're going to

be fighting with today) [introducing] legislation basically to outlaw strikes and boycotts. They called it a collective bargaining bill, but it was drawn up by the industry. It would have prohibited strikes at harvest time, prohibited boycotts, and you know, you could be sent to jail for talking bad about a product – it was just incredible. It actually almost made it through the state legislature, because farm workers, until recently, had always been used as pawns by labor and the Democrats. Whenever the Democrats wanted to get something, and they needed to get the conservative Republicans on the east side to go along, they would always use farm workers as trading chips – they would sacrifice the workers. And at that time, we heard that it was wired to go – the collective bargaining bill was gonna go - that a deal had been struck with labor's and the Democrats' complicity. It was only through the efforts of one senator – Senator Dirken - who filibustered it [in] the dieing hours of the legislature that we managed to stop it. But that again was the way that farm workers had been treated throughout history, starting back with the New Deal and the 1930's. When other workers were covered under collective bargaining laws and wage and hour laws and unemployment and social security, farm workers were kept out. And again, it was just a deal between the urban Democrats and...all the southern states [that] at that time were Democratic (they were called the Dixiecrats). For them to go along with the New Deal, they had to leave out workers. That's the historical basis for the differences and the second-class treatment of the farm workers and [their] exclusion from labor laws that had protected all other workers. So the same stuff had been playing in microcosm in the states up until the '70s; and actually, it continued until the late '80s. So we had our battles, and it's always that way, you know. You have the battles in the field, you have the battles in the courts, and you have the battles in the legislature. It's never a dull moment.

[To summarize] Senate Bill 5890 [being negotiated in Olympia as of April 2003], it has to do with testing of farm workers that mix and apply pesticides - testing them using blood samples to make sure they're not being poisoned, because they're spraying very deadly, organo-phosphate-based pesticides, and it dealt with that issue. We're trying to reach a compromise solution with the growers. The UFW has the backing of labor and the Democrats, so we're in a pretty good bargaining position. So that's what was taking place.

I think what was accomplished [in recent negotiations] was that representatives of the agriculture industry got the message that they won't have any influence on the legislation. They have to deal with us. I think they got that message pretty clear. Today we started settling the broad framework for an agreement that I thought we made a lot of progress on. That would include testing starting off with the major growers and testing the workers of those growers and setting up the medical monitoring system and talking about what happens to the workers that get overexposed, giving them some other jobs or time-lost benefits, so we got quite a bit done. I think it's going to take at least one more meeting, maybe

more, to just finalize it. And then once we get agreement as to who's covered and the timeframe and how the testing is going to be done, and when it's going to begin. We're talking about it [needing] to begin by the beginning of next year. Then we basically turn it over to Labor and Industry so they [can] write the rules and implement it.

The Department of Labor and Industry – they're the big department that deals with just about every labor regulation in the state of Washington, in terms of coming up with rules to implement legislation. We don't like them [L&I] because we think they're wishy-washy, and the growers don't like them because they strong-arm them. They're kind of caught in the middle.

I mentioned how I got involved and I left my job and then we made contact with the farm workers union and then they also sent a more experienced organizer. The first person they had sent over was just a controller, the treasurer – an accountant, because they didn't have anybody else at that time. And then after we got settled, they sent out a more experienced organizer – a person by the name of Jim Drake, who was a minister. He worked with the migrant ministry, but had been involved as one of the leaders of the organizing effort in California. That's what the union did. They relied not just on labor organizers or in-staff people, but they got a lot of different people involved that had had different experiences. So he came down and did an assessment of the situation and at that time there were two of us working – Roberto Trevino and myself. So he talked to both of us and then he assigned me to be the lead organizer or the head person in Washington for the union at that time. That's when we started getting funding from the farm workers union – it was called the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee – we weren't part of the AF of L at that point yet. We just got a small stipend. At that time, the union didn't pay its workers compensation per se. What they did is that they paid all your expenses, like the rent. They figured out what your expenses were – rent, oil, gas, electricity – and then would give you so much for food and clothing, and then would pay the cost of running the office. They did that to us, and then we opened a little office in Sunnyside, which had a staff of two – myself and Roberto Trevino. None of us really had any experience organizing, other than the strike. We had found it very difficult to get people together after the strike, because, as I mentioned before, there was a lot of blacklisting and retaliation by the employers. So we continued to try to have meetings, but we would call meetings and show up at a public meeting hall, and very few people would come.

We weren't getting very far through that winter and spring and then in the summer of I think it was '71, we were asked to go to California. The union had at that time – the United Farm Workers national office – had just moved into a new location called "La Paz." It was a headquarters in the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains. It used to be a former TB sanitarium where they had

sent people who had tuberculosis so that they could lie in bed and breathe the fresh country air, I guess, and the union had gotten it as a donation from one of the wealthy supporters. It was a big complex. It had over three hundred acres. So we went there and we were trained for about two or three – I think it was two days. Fred Ross, Sr., who is the person who trained Cesar on how to organize, and Cesar himself spent two days talking to us, just telling us the basics of organizing and giving us a history of how the organizing techniques that they had used very successfully in organizing farm workers had developed. The main organizing technique that the union was using at that time and that we still use is called the house meeting – house meeting campaign drive, where you would rely on other workers themselves to help you organize a community. You would go and identify the leaders and then do a – we call them personal visit – explain to them what the idea was – what the concept of unionizing was and how you could help them and what the benefits potentially could be, economically and politically and then get them to buy in – to agree it was a good thing. And then while they were excited, you would ask them then to hold a meeting at their house and invite four or five other people that they knew. That way the employers didn't know what was going on and the people would feel comfortable because it was at a friend's or relative's house. And then you would go in – you do reminding calls – and then you would go in and do your presentation and at the end – the main thing to get out of that meeting was to get other people to have other meetings. It was like a chain. So then you went to that person's and then you got two or three other meetings, and before too long, you covered a wide spectrum of the community. So Fred Ross demonstrated that for us how he did it and explained how Cesar had used it when he was first organizing and at the same time gave examples [and] gave a history of the union and got people involved in the whole process. It was very very much like the popular education that's being used throughout Latin America now.

So we came back and you know then you would have meetings every morning. The people would go out in pairs for the first month or so and then they would do critiques afterwards and people would make suggestions on how to improve the presentation. So then we came back and then by that time Fred Ross, Jr., the son of Fred Ross, Sr., was assigned to work also in Washington state. So there were three of us then instead of just two and we started the house meeting campaigns and they worked. We no longer held the big meetings where nobody would come but instead had a series of meetings. And then at the end then we would call a big meeting and then everybody would come because they were people that we had organized and that knew each other and we used the networks to mobilize these other people, so in the space of a year, we had turned the thing completely around, and we were having actually a lot of success in terms of getting people involved. That was between '70 and '72. In '70 we had the strikes in the fall and winter of '70 and '71. There had been a lot of repression and we couldn't get very far. And then in

'71 to '72, we had the house meeting drives and we had a lot of people involved and I remember we did a couple of house meeting campaigns – political campaigns. I forget what the exact issues were, but at one time we sent over a thousand letters to the governor of the state of Washington from the farm workers. I think it was an issue dealing with immigration. That had never been done before. By that time, after we had the hop strikes in 1970, in the winter we also had a strike at a nursery in Sunnyside where the workers walked out because they weren't getting enough wages and got a wage increase there.

So we were building the union and becoming pretty visible in the community – this is from '70 to '72 – and then in the summer of 1972, everybody got called to California – all the three organizers – myself, Roberto, and Fred Ross, Jr., to fight against an initiative that the agricultural industry had introduced in California. As I mentioned, the Farm Bureau here had introduced a so-called collective bargaining bill basically that stopped and made organizing very difficult. We were able to stop it here, but in California the growers tried to do it in the form of an initiative, calling it a “right to organize” initiative, but in reality it would have made organizing almost impossible. It was called Proposition 22. We were mobilized and were taken to go fight against the measure and I was asked to go there also and so was Roberto Trevino. We won the initiative; we got it passed [sic].

But then after that, the Teamsters had raided places where we were trying to organize in the lettuce [fields] and had signed sweetheart contracts with the growers of the lettuce, so another boycott was started by the national UFW and I ended up going on the boycott for a little over two and a half years. So I was gone from the state from basically '73 until '75 and didn't actually make it back to the state of Washington until 1977. So in my absence, Roberto Trevino stayed here and continued organizing, so you're going to have to talk to him to find out what happened during that time; but, as I understand it, most of the efforts were directed at keeping the boycott going in Washington. It was the lettuce boycott, and then it turned into a grape and lettuce boycott, where they had to go and organize people to go and picket in front of the Safeways and in front of Luckys and the stores that sold the lettuce and the grapes.

I returned to the state of Washington in 1977 and the union was still here, but because it had been directed more towards organizing support for the boycott, not too much had been done in terms of building up the power base very much. Shortly thereafter, the UFW office in Washington was closed down, and remained closed from 1977 until 1986, when organizing efforts started again.

In 1986, conditions had gotten really bad instead of better. Until I left in the early '70s, most of the workforce was still Texas-based, and most of it was legal residents or citizens, mainly Mexicans or Mexican-Americans, like my family. My father was a Mexican national, but the kids were all American citizens, born in

this country. By the time 1986 came around, the workforce had changed completely. A lot of them now were recent immigrants, most of them undocumented, and lived in this country since the mid-70s and the Mexican workers that used to work in the row crops had now moved into orchard work – into the apple industry and the fruit-picking industry. Now just about all the work was dominated by the Mexican workers, including the tree fruit work. Then the growers found out that if they put a Mexican national to work, they could lower the wages down substantially. So wages had actually gotten worse, from the '70s to the 1980s and people were working, for example, pruning trees and not earning minimum wages, getting paid very little for example for the piece-rate work in the asparagus and in the picking of apples. That was the impetus for the new organizing efforts of 1986.

In the spring of 1986, it was actually around April – a new organization had been formed called Radio Campesina or Radio “Cadena.” Let me back up a little on that... In the 1970s, the first public radio station in Spanish was started in the Yakima Valley called Radio KDNA (“Cadena”). It was started by Ricardo Garcia and it was started with the express purpose of being a voice for the farm worker and a forum for the social needs of the workers to be talked about and communicated throughout the community. The radio station opened an office in Granger – a little town of about 80 or 90 per cent farm worker population and they started a service center where they did tax work and immigration work.

In addition to having the radio station broadcast from there, they also started a thing called El Centro Campesino. It was an advocacy group representing the interests of the farm workers, and they were saving money for different grants. In the spring of 1986, they helped organize a big march from Granger all the way to Yakima throughout the Yakima Valley for the express purpose of publicizing the bad working conditions and the low wages for the workers and the march was pretty successful. About 2,000 people participated, including Cesar Chavez, who flew over for the last leg of the march and marched into Yakima Union Gap, Yakima. The bishop of Yakima, Bishop William Stilstadt, came and marched with Cesar the last miles. So we got a lot of publicity. After that, the United Farm Workers of Washington State, a successor organization to the UFWOC, was started, and it was a completely independent organization from the national UFW. They raised all their funds and made decisions completely independent of California. There was a convention that was held I think in early '86, and Tomás Villanueva was elected president of the United Farm Workers of Washington State. He started talking to the workers and helping them on strikes and helping them on the legislative efforts.

In 1987, a group of workers came to the union office complaining of low wages in pruning. They were pruning at a place called Pyramid Orchards in Yakima and they were not even making minimum wages, even though it was piece-work and they should have been making a lot more. So Tomás and I went

down and talked to the workers, and they agreed to go out on strike, to force the issue out, and to force the employer to pay higher wages in pruning. That strike was pretty famous. It was the longest strike of farm workers in the history of the state of Washington. It started in April and continued for about two months. But it was in a period of time when you couldn't apply much pressure to the employer because it was just pruning and the trees were dormant. After the first couple of days, he was able to get a small crew to continue the pruning and then slowly started recruiting strikebreakers to come over and replace the workers that were out on strike. But the strike had tremendous success, again through the Radio Campesina, it got publicized and people were asked to come to the picket line and lots of people would show up. People started showing up and bringing plates and bowls and panfuls of food for the strikers. I remember for example once [Tomás has a lot of these documents about the strike, because it made the news just about every day.] during the strike we heard that the company had been talking to other growers and they were planning to bring a bunch of workers and growers in to break the strike [on] a certain weekend. All the other growers were supposed to bring their trusted workers. What happened was that people found out about it and there was an announcement put out through the radio for people to show up. So on the day of the strike, there were over a thousand people picketing that orchard from throughout the community. When the growers started arriving with their strikebreakers, a lot of the Latino farm workers walked out and refused to go in. (Pyramid Orchards [was] based just a little outside of Yakima.)

Another tactic that they used was again going to the courts. One day the workers showed up and they all got served with injunctions telling them that they couldn't picket anymore, accusing the workers of harassing and intimidating the workers that were inside. So we were summoned to go to court. We got Michael Fox, who had represented us when he and I had gotten arrested in the '70s for going into a labor camp. By that time I had become an attorney and so I helped represent the workers also. We had a big hearing in the courthouse in Yakima where over 500 people showed up – farm workers – and had a big impact, and the strike was modified to permit picketing, because before it didn't even permit picketing. Eventually, after about two or three months, the strike was ended, because there was no use carrying it forward because the pruning had basically been done, even though it was done badly. But it was during this strike, even though the strike itself wasn't very successful [that we] did raise the wages in that orchard and then throughout the area. What happened was that during the strike, because they got so much publicity on the radio, workers from other farms started coming and complaining about the bad treatment they were getting. It was very similar to the hop strike, where we struck one ranch then all the other workers came and asked for help.

In this case, the workers at Chateau Ste. Michelle, the largest winery and also the largest grower of wine grapes in the state, came to us saying that they were

being mistreated and that their wages had been lowered and they wanted to take some action. As I mentioned before, I had become an attorney by that time, so we went down and talked to them and told them that in addition to a legal action what they really needed to do was to get organized. So that's what happened. The union started organizing at Chateau Ste. Michelle and got the majority of the workers signed up on authorization cards and requested recognition from the company that ignored our request, because we still didn't have the right to bargain collectively, at first saying that we didn't have the support of the workers, and then later when a large portion of the workers sued the company, it changed its rationale for not negotiating, saying that they wouldn't negotiate because there [were] no collective bargaining procedures established in Washington. The union at this time was being led by Tomás Villanueva. When that happened, the union launched the boycott of Chateau Ste. Michelle and Columbia Crest wines in '87.

A lot of the organizing is not just working in the fields, but also working in the courts and in the legislature. As I mentioned before, we managed to stop the attempts by the Farm Bureau to pass a real bad law that would have made organizing almost impossible and we won an important court decision in Prosser, when the growers came out and met us with shotguns and intimidated the workers with shotguns. That court decision, *Garza v. Patnode*, held that workers had the right to organize without interference from the employer and then granted an injunction against that type of behavior, because it was clearly intimidating. That's when the growers tried to get a law passed in the legislature and we were able to stop them.

Another important legal victory was the following year, in '71. [It] occurred when we were going around visiting different camps and we went and visited a big asparagus farm in Walla Walla, a very conservative county. It was a big asparagus farm where they brought all the workers from Texas under an international worker clearance program. Under that worker program, the workers are supposed to be guaranteed a certain wage and certain protections because they use the employment security inter-state system to bring them up. But once they got here, a lot of those rules weren't enforced. What was happening at this asparagus farm – it was called Rogers of Walla Walla – we went in, it was late summer or midsummer, and the workers were still cutting asparagus and normally the season starts in April and goes into the early part of July. Then it becomes not very productive. But at this company, they were deducting part of the workers' salary and calling it "bonus" which would be paid at the end, if they stayed 'til the end. But towards the end of the season, the asparagus doesn't become very productive, so workers don't make much money. What the company was doing was that if a worker failed to show up to work one day then they would lose the bonus, no matter if they stayed there [or not] – the so-called "bonus." On the blackboard in the dining room [was posted] a list of the names of "estos trabajadores han perdido sus bonus." So if you lost

a bonus, then your name would be put up there publicly, as intimidation to keep the other workers in line and to keep them from leaving. So when we went in there and told them we were with the union and workers started complaining about bad treatment and the fact that a lot of them were losing bonuses and they weren't making minimum wages anymore, I told them that I would go back with an attorney so they could talk with the attorney. A couple of days later I showed up with Mike Fox, who was a legal services attorney. We both went into the labor camp. When we came back we were met with a guy wearing a gun and a Walla Walla Deputy Sheriff's shirt and he asked us if we had permission from the company to be in the labor camp but we said we didn't need permission from the company – we didn't want to visit the company, we wanted to visit the workers. So Michael Fox ran interference and kept talking to the sheriff and then I went and found the worker that had asked me to come and started talking to him. That off-duty sheriff called another one and then eventually another sheriff came and asked us to leave and we refused to leave and both my attorney and I were arrested and hauled off to the Walla Walla county jail for criminal trespassing. Eventually we filed a lawsuit against that, claiming that workers had the right as tenants to see whoever they wanted and also arguing some constitutional issues. We lost at the lower court levels, but eventually it got to the Supreme Court I believe in 1972 and the Supreme Court in Washington in a unanimous decision upheld the rights of workers to receive whoever they wanted in their labor camp homes, so that established an important precedent.

This Michael Fox is a guy (this legal services attorney that got arrested with me) [who's] also the person that helped us in the injunction against the big apple company that tried to keep us from picketing and fought it successfully in court. But interestingly enough, by the time we struck the second time, we didn't have that massive grower hysteria where they would actually come out with shotguns. It was a lot calmer. But what did happen after the second strike, when the workers struck in the apples at Condon Orchards, [was that] it freaked out a lot of the growers, so they got together and they made contact with a grower organization in California in the Central Valley called the Nisei Grower's League. It was made up of Japanese-American farmers who had set up an organization basically to fight off the union. So they got together and got some training and pointers on how to fight the union and then set up their own organization here called at that time the Eastern Washington Growers' League. It was set up with the express purpose of training growers on how to break union organizing campaigns and strikes. Now it's just called the Washington Growers' League and one of the guys – that big guy that was a lobbyist [Chris Cheney] – is hired by them. They've become a little more moderate, also. They're not quite as rabidly anti-union.

The director of that organization, from its inception, is a guy by the name of Mike Gempler. In '86 – now you're going to get this in more detail from Tomás

Villanueva, because he's the one actually leading all the strikes at that time – the [United] Farm Workers of Washington State was formed. They tried to get incorporated with California again, but Cesar told them that he had more than he could handle in California but offered to help them in any way he could. So Tomás and his members of his board went down to California and received a week's worth of training from Cesar and then they came back. And after the strike in the apple orchards, a group of workers came from Chateau Ste. Michelle to the strike line.

Anyway, so what happened was that this strike was started at Pyramid Orchards in I think February of 1987, right in the middle of the winter, during the pruning season and it became big news all over central Washington, because there hadn't been any activity in years and the growers had really dropped the wages and really been mistreating workers. So it became a cause celebre. Now we had the radio. A lot of people started converging on the picket lines and bringing food and refreshments and pan dulce and [laughter] it became a real big community event. Then other employees started coming saying they had been treated badly also [and] would the union help them. That's when we first met the workers from Chateau Ste. Michelle. [They] came down and said that they were being really mistreated by new supervisors and their wages had been lowered and that's when that campaign was started. But in addition to the Chateau Ste. Michelle campaign – that was another big strike year. The union also had strikes in asparagus, hops, [and] apples.

Another thing that also was very significant was that in 1986, by the time that I came back in the mid-80's, in '86, the workforce was largely undocumented, and the Mexican workforce was just dominating the whole industry. Then in 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act was passed that permitted a process for legalizing workers that was a two-prong process. Workers that had lived in this country continuously for five years could become legal residents on the basis of residency. But farm workers that had worked 90 days or more the previous year could also become legalized. It was very, very generous farm worker provisions for legalization. You just showed that you had worked 90 days or more the previous year and then you became legalized and could get your green card. The employers were very concerned that if everybody became legalized, they wouldn't have any workers, so they were pressing the federal congress for another big expansion of the guest worker program, the H2A program, to guarantee them a supply of cheap labor and we said, "No. If you need the workers, they should have the right to become legal like all the other workers." So we were able to negotiate, just like this morning, with the agricultural community, and get agreement on this. It was called the SAW Programs, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker component, of the immigration reform law, that provided that if workers had worked here 90 days or more the previous year and had proof of it, [they] could become legal residents.

[The H2A visa program is] an offshoot of the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was started in the 1940s, during the Second World War. A lot of the work force at that time was comprised of Okies and Arkies and native people – American Indians, and Blacks and Mexican-Americans. When the war started, a lot of factories started gearing up to produce planes and munitions.

Agriculture then made a convincing argument that they needed more workers, because their workers were leaving. So there was a treaty signed between the governments of Mexico and the U.S. called the Bracero Program, where workers could be brought up on a temporary contract basis, as needed, to work here, and then would be shipped back to Mexico every year. They were supposed to have basic guarantees, like guaranteed wages, that they be provided with food, housing, medical care and bedding. So under that program, first hundreds of thousands and then millions of Mexican workers came up to this country, including here in Washington. My cousin, Erasmo Gamboa, actually wrote a book about it – about the Bracero Program in Washington. Here it only lasted from '42 to '47 or so, and then they found it cheaper to bring in people from Texas. But in California, the war ended, then agribusiness became hooked on it, because you had a cheap supply of foreign workers that you could mistreat and the laws were never enforced. They liked it so much that the war ended and they kept extending it until the mid-1960's – can you believe that? Well, the growers stopped using it [in Washington in '47]. It didn't end. They stopped using it. It was a federal program, and the federal program was continued until 1965 or '66.

They used workers from Texas instead, recruited by the Washington Employment Security System. But in California, the big corporations liked that a lot. They would form associations and bring in tons of workers. That's actually how the first organizing experiences of Cesar involved organizing workers to fight the Bracero Program – the local workers – because they couldn't get any job. They were always given to the foreign workers, even though the program specified that they couldn't hire braceros when there local workers available. In one form or another, it continued under the H2A Program, which still exists right now. Growers can bring in foreign workers, but they have to show that there's no local workers available, and they have to pay a higher wage, in order not to depress the local wage rates, and they have to provide housing and a certain amount of employment. So the growers don't like that, because it's got too many restrictions. They find it cheaper to just hire undocumented workers.