

Sal Si Puedes  
God, help us be men  
Hay mas tiempo que vida  
You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore  
Si Se Puede

Good afternoon:

When I was given the honor to address you today, I started thinking about what should we know about Cesar Chavez. I started asking others what did they know? Una Mexicana de Bay City, que tiene 22 años, no conocía a César Chávez. Another very respected colleague reminded me that he was foremost a “labor organizer,” and didn’t want to be famous. Another asked would I also be talking about Dolores Huerta? Still another was conflicted by his stance against Scab Laborers, many Mexican and Mexican Americans.

What did I know? The basics that many of you know.

- With Dolores Huerta, they formed a union
- Grape Boycott
- A 340 mile march
- Lettuce Boycott
- Hunger strike

There is of course much more to the story of each of these, in fact there is much more we should know about Cesar Chavez. What I want to share with you is what I did not know but learned as I prepared for today.

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Cesar Chavez was born to a relatively comfortable life.

His grandfather had a ranch. His father had a few businesses – grocery store, pool hall, and a garage.

First, the depression struck. Businesses suffered, and eventually closed. The family then moved to the grandfather’s ranch. Drought hit, impacting the ranch, but they still owned the property. There was still hope.

Falling behind on payment of taxes, land was confiscated and they were evicted.

At around 11 years of age, His father goes to look for work in California.

The family leaves Arizona and become migrant workers.

This is when the family begins to suffer the indignities of being poor farm workers.

- They learned of the corruption by Labor Contractors.
- Paying fees to get work that paid less than advertised.
- Or when you arrived there was no work.
- Working for days with the promise of being paid at the end of the week, only for the contractor to disappear with their wages.
- When weights were used to determine their pay, the recorded weights were always under reported. Or on a piece count basis, their counts were always rejected in favor of a lower count.

- The contractor kept the under reported amounts for themselves – stealing their work.

They learned of the absence of decent housing. Many families cramped into one room shacks with no water or electricity. Out houses for use by 10's of people. Dirt floors. No heat. No air condition, sometimes not even windows.

First encounters with the US Border Patrols. No distinction made between US Citizenship and Mexican Nationals The suspicion endured when entering “White” establishments. And that is if allowed to enter.

There was the impact of being migrant workers on the children's education. Cesar attended at least 37 schools by the time he got to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As far as he went. In his biography he states that the segregated schools, even with substandard facilities, were preferred to the integrated schools where Mexican children were treated like monkeys in a cage. Where teachers did not hide their disdain for Mexican children. Remember there was little if any distinction made for US Citizenship.

And to encapsulate all these indignities, living in a barrio named, “**Sal si puedes**” get out if you can.

During all this turmoil, one of the most important influences in his life, that was to sustain Cesar for the rest of his life, was his upbringing by his mother and father and the kind of family they had, giving in nature, belief in the service of others, loyalty, integrity, honesty, humility.

As migrant workers, they learned the hard way the cruelty of their situation. When they saw other “newbies,” the Chavez family helped them avoid all the traps they had fallen into. When food or gas or money was scarce, they shared with those who had less even when they had little to begin with.

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Eventually, Cesar joins the Navy to escape the migrant life. In the process he gives up his Pachuco ways. Look it up 😊.

It was when he was home (Delano) on leave that he was arrested for sitting in the wrong section of a movie theater, and refusing to move. In his autobiography, he points out he was NOT in uniform, this is so often misreported.

- According to Cesar it was his first act of overt civil disobedience. He wanted the same freedom as others to sit where he wanted.
- He was arrested, but not booked. It was a practice he challenged, not a law. Not knowing what to charge him with he was released after about an hour.

**“you cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.”**

Newly married to Helen, they struggled to find work, even in the fields. Working where ever they could find work. The Bracero program made migrant work even harder to find. The influx of Mexican (Nationals) being the cause of scarce work became a flashpoint for Cesar, and later put him at odds with Braceros while working for the CSO (1952 to 1962). Even into his union years (1962) strike breakers were often Mexican nationals or other Mexican Americans. Often referred to as scab labor. Imagine, those who were undercutting your strike looking just like you. We are often pitted against each other. While it is clear his opposition to scab labor, knowing his nature, the conflict he must have felt needing to oppose those used to undermine the very effort that would have also helped them.

After working three years at the CSO, Cesar meets Dolores Huerta. Perhaps we will celebrate her equally one day. She deserves her day too. I think it is important to note that Dolores did not follow the crops as a child. Married at 19. Dropped out of college for a while and later got her teaching credentials. All the while attending to her growing family. No wonder she came up "Si Se Puede."

When asked if Cesar was a Civil Rights leader or a Labor rights leader, the answer is both.

- The CSO was a Civil Rights organization. While the CSO did focus on core civil rights issues, like voter registrations, Cesar also pursued organizing efforts for workers.
- Cesar came to national prominence for his labor rights work after leaving the CSO.
- It was his time with the CSO that Cesar cut his teeth organizing groups. He did not do it with fiery speeches to large groups. He succeeded by meeting with workers in small groups in their homes.
- How many here remember Richard Chavez coming to Saginaw and meeting with small numbers in people's homes.
- The CSO experience for both Dolores and Cesar proved to be invaluable when they organized members for their Union.

Cesar saw the need for a union for farm workers. He tried to form a union while at the CSO. He was told he could try, but it had never been successfully done. For a time, the AFL-CIO put resources into the effort. They then lost faith that a union would ever become a reality and pulled out. Shortly after, Cesar demanded the CSO support his effort to organize farm workers. He threatened to quit if the CSO would not support his effort. At first the CSO said they would support him, but then withdrew their support. Cesar then quit his position. The CSO tried to entice his return by offering him \$200/wk.

He replied, "it's not more money. I can't organize with you guys. You're not going to give me the freedom I need."

This is the most important thing I learned about Cesar Chavez. He was not a man with nothing to lose that drove him to fight. He was a man who give up every thing to win ... for others. Indeed, Cesar left a solidly middle class living, with 8 children at home, to be in the service of others. He did that with the support of his wife Helen. For a while they lived in a tent before returning to Delano, Helen's home town. At least there they knew they would have something to eat.

- Why would he do this? Remember his upbringing? His mother her whole life would give to those with less even when she had little to begin with.
- He was moved by the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who forfeited his riches to live and work among the poor.
- Maybe his own words will help us understand,

"I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. **God help us be men.**"

Why then? Maybe he remembered one of his mother's dichos, "**Hay mas tiempo que vida.**" There is more time than life. So, let's get on with it before life ends. Time will still be there after life is over.

Now comes the time in Cesar's life we are most familiar. La Causa! The cause.

There had been random efforts before to unionize farm workers. There was a checkered history of starts and stops.

Already discussed was the scab labor tactics to break strikes.

Time was also a weapon, wait out the strikers and when they get hungry enough, they will come back to work. These are the most benign methods.

We need to discuss the brutality that growers and agri-business routinely used. The beating of strikers, men, women, children, it didn't matter. They used fists, pipes, clubs. Injuries were severe to the point of death. Even pesticides were sprayed on the strikers.

And who were these thugs who did the beatings? Yes, some were hired. However, often they were the police, to serve and protect...the interest of the growers and agri-business. Beatings were never done in the public arena but at the fields, out of sight and with impunity.

Cesar's first hunger strike (1966, 25 days) was to

- refocus the then ongoing grape boycott to the principal of non-violence. Not to the thugs, but to his people.
- He was motivated by the teachings of Gandhi for non-violent civil disobedience.
- Even before reading Gandhi, his mother, a pacifist, had instilled in her children that intellect was more powerful than fists.
- When the protests moved to the markets, it was televised, it was reported on, and all shades of Americans joined La Causa. Beatings on TV was not a good look.

Of course, political violence was also in the tool box for the growers and agri-business.

- Restrictive laws against organizing were routinely used to break unionization effects.
- Farm workers were excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, the gold standard for worker's rights.
- The then Governor of California, Ronald Regan, would publicly eat grapes during the boycott to show his disdain for la causa, calling it immoral.
- President Nixon during his campaign for the presidency routinely offered grapes at his campaign events. As president, when grapes were rotting in warehouses, ordered the Defense Department to purchase 11 million pounds to be shipped to Europe and Viet Nam for our armed forces. (Side note this plan met resistance when dock workers refused to handle the shipments.)

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Why am I bothering with this talk of history? The past is not the solution to the present but a pathway to the future. Here is how I come to know Cesar Chavez:

A humble man with a limited 8<sup>th</sup> grade formal education,  
but a deep abiding belief in service of others to the point of giving up his comfortable life,  
willing to form coalitions, devoid of the pride of ownership,  
through hunger strikes, at great risk to his life, made the world aware, in a non-violent way, the plight of the farm worker.

To aid him in this effort, great allies surrounded him. Names like Dolores Huerta, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Larry Itliong (Filipino Labor Organizer – Started the Delano Grape Boycott.)

His battle was against the wealthy, Giant Corporations, the law, Governors and even the President of the United States.

“...You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.”

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Let us now hear the first part of the quote where this comes from:

**“Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate a person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore”**

Today we celebrate Cesar Chavez. I ask you to honor him by following his example.

When you are told you cannot effect change, respond with the words Dolores Huerta give us:

Si se puede

When you are told you cannot be a doctor, you will respond

Si se puede

When you are told you cannot be a Senator, you will respond

Si se puede

To all your challenges How will you respond? Si se puede

Si se puede! si se puede! si se puede!

Gracias y que Dios los bendiga