



### *Carrying on His Grandfather's Legacy*

**Cesar Chavez**

**Los Angeles, USA**

To millions of people across the United States, Cesar Chavez was “the Latin Gandhi.” But to his namesake, the famous Cesar Chavez was just his grandfather. When Anthony Chavez had his first son in 1981, he had given the baby his father’s name. By then, the senior Cesar Chavez was traveling most of the time.

Little Cesar often heard stories about his grandfather; about how he had awakened Americans nationwide to the plight of migrant farm workers in California and convinced them to join them in boycotting one of their favorite fruits—grapes. It took five long years, but eventually they got the farm owners to make concessions – to stop using deadly pesticides - that made a huge difference in people’s lives.

Little Cesar often saw his grandfather on TV, as he went around the state, inspiring union workers, demanding fair contracts from farmers, and challenging state officials to care for *all* of their people. He always closed with the same message: “When you have people together who believe in something very strongly - whether it's religion or politics or unions - things happen,” he would tell them. “We can choose to use our lives for others; to bring about a better, and more just, world for our children.”

It was always exciting when Cesar, the “gentle giant,” would finally come home from his travels. Most of the United Farm Workers (UFW) families lived together on a 200-acre ranch near the Tehachapi Mountains, which had once been a health center for people with tuberculosis. It had also once served as a movie set. Then the director of the film sold it to the UFW for just \$1. Cesar called it “La Paz,” for the peacefulness he felt there. Being in nature was always the best medicine to help him rest, especially after a long journey.

Cesar named their communal kitchen, where the community would share meals together, *Pan Y Vino* (Bread and Wine). “He had studied cultures where the people who worked together, ate together,” his grandson explains. He loved to watch the children running around, sharing stories with his devoted community of comrades. “All the volunteers working with the union, they weren’t just workmates – they were our friends, people we trusted and depended on.”

For most of his life, young Cesar lived next door to his grandfather. By the time he woke up at 6:00 a.m. to go to school, he’d see his grandfather already walking down the dirt road to begin his workday. Often, he’d come home late at night. “I always knew he was really busy,” Cesar says, adding, “But he always took time for us.”

After school, Cesar would stop by his grandfather’s office. “He’d stop whatever he was doing, even during meetings,” Cesar remembers. “He’d bring us in and introduce us to everyone, then hug us and tell us he was busy and that we should do our homework and come back later to visit.”

What he remembers most are the long hikes they’d take together into the mountains. “He’d show me these beautiful trails, and places he called our secret caves,” he says. “And we’d talk about grandfather-grandson things.”

A devoted student of Mahatma Gandhi, Cesar Chavez often fasted to bring much-needed media attention to the farmworkers’ struggle. In 1987, he started the Fast for Life. Little Cesar, who was just six, visited him every day and brought him water. He fondly remembers the long hugs his grandfather would give him.

To Cesar, it seemed like a normal childhood, except that they lived at the UFW headquarters. On Friday nights, all of Cesar's cousins would join with his father in the big hall to silkscreen the UFW's black eagle onto red flags. "It was great fun," Cesar says. "We'd run with each flag to the end of the hall, lay it out to dry, and run back for the next one." By the end of the night there would be thousands of flags laying all over the floor, waiting to be put onto poles. Cesar would go to bed exhausted, but happy knowing the next day he'd see everyone waving the flags, and that he had played a part.

Sometimes his grandfather would remind Cesar and his cousins of the deeper meaning of their work. Even though he had been born and raised in the United States and served in the Army, he had felt the pain of being treated like a second-hand citizen. He wanted his people to retain pride in their own heritage as well in the contributions they had made to their new home. "Symbols are important," he would say. "We chose the Aztec eagle for our symbol, because it gives us pride. When our people see it, they feel a sense of dignity."

Saturday mornings, Cesar, and his family and friends, would all pile into station wagons and caravan down to that day's march, strike, or demonstration in Los Angeles or San Diego; or sometimes at their local supermarkets. While their parents formed picket lines, the children would walk around the parking lot passing out fliers and asking people for donations. Young and old, they each did their part, in solidarity with those who were working away in hot fields without health benefits, or enough food to feed their own families.

Cesar always wanted the children to walk close by him in the front of the marches. He found joy and energy in their youthful enthusiasm and the songs they'd sing, like "De Colores." Along the way, the children often learned important lessons from him. "One time a van of children drove by flipping us off," young Cesar remembers. "We were mad—but my grandfather just waved to them and gave them a big smile," he says. "Later he talked with us about the importance of nonviolence, of just being nice to one another. And he would say 'There is enough love and goodwill in our movement to give energy to our struggle and still have plenty left over to change the climate of hate and fear around us.'"

Sometimes young Cesar and his cousins would become discouraged by the seemingly overwhelming odds against them. "Our opponents in the agricultural industry are very powerful; and farm workers are weak in money and influence," their grandfather would say. "But we have another kind of power that comes from the justice of our cause. If we are willing to sacrifice for the cause, and persist in nonviolence; and if we work to spread the message of our struggle, millions of people around the world will respond from their hearts, will support our efforts...And in the end, we will overcome." Then, renewed by his heartfelt words, everyone would smile, and shout out, "*Viva la Causa!*"

Cesar's grandfather had always nourished his love for learning. Since he himself had never had a chance to finish the eighth grade, he strongly encouraged his people to stay in school and get a good education. And even though they were making progress, he was troubled that Latinos were still dropping out of school at record levels. Some had to leave, to get jobs so they could help feed their families. However, too many were dropping out for the wrong reasons.

Cesar Chavez knew that oppressed people throughout history often missed out on getting an education. He also knew that the key to sustaining the movement was to educate people about the issues; to help them distinguish facts from myths, let them know what progress was being made, and learn about the battles being won by their brothers and sisters in other parts of the country. He was troubled that most books about the movement weren't available in Spanish, so his people couldn't read about how they were making history.

On many levels, Cesar Chavez was way ahead of his time. Long before the technology was ready, he had dreamed of creating a network of radio stations to educate and entertain his people. He was determined to find a way to keep them connected with up-to-date news so they could quickly respond when called to action. He wanted to build on their Latino oral tradition, by passing on their history through storytelling. He first tried to buy ad space on the local radio stations. "But back in the 60's and 70's, the stations were all owned by the growers," he told his grandson. "They threw us out and told us never to come back."

Undeterred, he pursued his dream in a most unconventional way. He designed a plan to invent a makeshift microwave telephone system and received a grant from the state of California to implement it. The phone system, with satellite dishes on the mountaintops soon became the second largest in California, next to Pacific Bell.

From an early age, young Cesar had shown promise in technology and had taken an electronics class in high school. He'd been helping his father run the UFW's audio-visual equipment and installing their phone and alarm systems. "I ran all the wire in the attics and basements, crawling through spider webs," Cesar says of his early adventures into the world of technology. So, he was a natural candidate to help his grandfather build this new communications system. Soon he was climbing mountains with his father, installing the satellite dishes and connecting people in cities all over California. In the early days, it was quite a challenging project. If just one of the dishes went down, half of the cities in the network would be disconnected. Sometimes in the middle of the night, they'd have to travel to the cold, icy mountaintops to fix one, returning the next morning just in time for Cesar to go to school.

Finally, the project was ready: Cesar's grandfather applied for their first radio license, housed it in the National Farm Workers Service Center, and named it **Radio Campesino**. By May 1, 1983, they were on the air for the first time. Cesar warmly welcomed all his listeners, his courageous words ringing out strong and true. By November 1990 they were transmitting all the way to Phoenix, Arizona. After many long years, Cesar's dream was finally starting to come true.

But he wouldn't live to see the day when Radio Campesino would be connected via the latest satellite technology, computers, and digital audio software.

Cesar Chavez died near where he was born, in Uma, Arizona, where he'd been helping to fight another fight for his people. Young Cesar knew that something must be wrong when his father came to pick him up at school early one day. After putting the younger children in the car, he put his arm around Cesar and whispered in his ear, "Tata has passed away." At first Cesar couldn't believe his beloved grandfather was gone. But as they drove home, he heard the announcement on the radio. Then it hit him, hard.

Cesar's grandfather would have been proud of all those with careers in law, medicine, and education, who brought their children to his funeral. Rudolfo Anaya, known as a father of Chicano literature, gave the eulogy. "Our morning star," he called him. "...that luminous light that greeted workers as they gathered around the dawn campfires." And young Cesar read aloud the Prayer of St. Francis Assisi, in honor of his grandfather's love of nature.

Cesar is now carrying on his grandfather's legacy as the director of digital strategy at the Cesar Chavez Foundation. "Everything my grandfather fought for is still worth fighting for," he says, and adds, "Every day I realize how much the world needs to change, so our people can have equal rights, and peace. I try every day to push myself toward that goal, the way my grandfather did."

Now every day from 5:30 am to 3:00 pm., Radio Campesino is broadcast to people in eight states. During the workday, it lifts workers' spirits by playing Nortena Banda top 40's music. Local experts are featured on a 30-minute talk show. A paralegal informs them of their immigration rights; a highway patrolman urges them to wear seat belts; a nurse tells them how to protect themselves from the effects of pesticides. Because of Radio Campesino, now apple pickers in Washington, industrial workers in factories and woodshops in Oregon, and farm workers from Salinas, California to Puma and Parker, Arizona are all connected to a network of people helping people.

Listeners call in to share their struggles. "My husband got fired and we don't know what to do," or "They're not paying us overtime." Radio Campesino guides people to the UFW, or in some cases, to a lawyer. "We're always here if people need our help," Cesar says. "Over the years, we've become a useful tool for the whole community to better themselves, to keep the UFW's struggle going, and to keep my grandfather's legacy alive."

California was the first state to have a holiday in honor of Cesar Chavez--the Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning. Now nine other states--Colorado, New Mexico, Michigan, Texas, Arizona, Utah, Wisconsin, Washington, Minnesota and Las Vegas --all have a Day of Recognition as well.

Cesar now shares his grandfather's message by traveling to schools and communities across California. He knows his grandfather would be pleased to know that 41 schools have been named in his honor. "My grandfather inspired me to dedicate my life to helping others in any way I can," he says. Then he paraphrases a Mexican *dicho* by Padilla: "Cesar was our pine tree, and we are his forest."

La Paz has been transformed into a retreat center with a beautiful memorial garden around Cesar Chavez's gravesite. His office is now a museum where visitors from around the world continue to learn about this great man. If you visit there someday, you just might hear his words echo in your ears, "Perhaps we can bring the day when children will learn that being fully man and fully woman means to give one's life to the liberation of those who suffer. It is up to each one of us. It won't happen unless we decide to use our lives to show the way."

*True wealth is not measured in money or status or power.*

*It is measured in the legacy we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire.*

Cesar Chavez

**Call To Action:** Find ways to use technology to educate and bring hope to oppressed people.

Tune into Radio Campesino: [www.radiocampesina.com](http://www.radiocampesina.com). Support the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation: [www.cccf.org](http://www.cccf.org).

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