

# BY GIVING OUR LIVES, WE FIND LIFE

Told by Marc Grossman

**For the migrant** farm worker, each day felt virtually endless; each night he was exhausted and often hungry. His life stood in stunning contrast to the lives of the comfortable families who savored the fruits of his labor. In a land that promised plenty, migrant farm workers in the 1960s had basically no voice, no rights or protections. But how could they possibly appeal to an America that, for the most part, didn't know they existed?

Cesar Chavez knew their troubles firsthand. As a poor, disenfranchised, foreign-born, itinerant farm worker, he was an unlikely national hero. He was small, soft-spoken, and low-key, a guy you could easily lose in a crowd. But this gentle person woke up the drowsy conscience of the most powerful country in the world when he showed ordinary Americans the power of their everyday consumer choices.

For years, Americans shopped the grocery aisles guided by nutritional facts, personal budgets, or culinary whim. They brought home sweet, plump clusters of green and red table grapes without a second thought until, in the late 1960s, deciding whether or not to buy grapes became a powerful political act.

Of all the agricultural laborers, grape pickers may have had it the worst. Farm workers had been trying to organize a union for more than one hundred years. In 1965 they went on strike against grape growers around Delano, California. Two and a half years later, in the hungry

winter of 1968, with no resolution in sight, they were tired, bitter, and increasingly frustrated.

Concerned for his people's future, Cesar decided to ask for help. He believed in people's ability to find their common ground, no matter how different they appeared. He thought that if people in communities throughout the nation knew about the needless suffering of farm workers, they would step up and do what they could to help.

Taking a bold leap of faith, Cesar invited consumers across North America to join in solidarity with his union, the United Farm Workers. He asked them to send a message to the grape growers by boycotting California table grapes. The boycott began slowly, but it built steadily over the next couple of years. First California, then the rest of the nation and even Canada joined in support of the strikers.

In the meantime, some of the strikers had become understandably impatient for results. They had already waited so long, and to some of them, particularly some of the young men, the boycott must have seemed too little, too late. Murmurings of violence began; some workers wanted to strike back at the powers who had abused them and their families. By fighting back, they thought they could prove their manhood. But Cesar rejected that part of Hispanic culture "that tells our young men that you're not a man if you don't fight back." He had conceived the boycott in the nonviolent tradition of his hero, Mahatma Gandhi. From Gandhi, Cesar had learned how fasting could draw attention to injustice in the world. As the protest threatened to explode, he announced that he was undertaking a fast, as a profound admonishment and an example of self-control and sacrifice for his people.

The fast divided the UFW. Many didn't understand why Cesar was doing it. Others worried about his health. But those farm workers who understood held a mass nightly near where Cesar was fasting at the Forty Acres, the UFW's headquarters in Delano. Hundreds came, then thousands. People pitched tents nearby. They brought religious offerings—pictures and small statues. Farm workers waited in line for hours to speak with Cesar in his tiny room, while he refused interviews with reporters.

After twenty-five days, Cesar was carried to a nearby park, where he ended his fast during a mass with thousands of farm workers. He had lost thirty-five pounds, and there was no more talk of violence among the farm workers. Cesar's message had gotten through. Senator Robert Kennedy came to the mass, he said, "out of respect for one of the heroic figures of our time."

Cesar was too weak to speak, so others read his statement in both English and Spanish, on his behalf: "It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. The truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men."

What followed was truly amazing. Through Cesar's efforts, middle-class families in Northeastern cities and Midwestern suburbs connected with poor families in the hot California vineyards. Motivated by compassion, millions of people across North America stopped eating the grapes they had loved so much, and thousands of dinner tables became a forum for parents to teach their children a simple, powerful lesson in

social justice. By 1970, bowing to pressure from the boycott, grape growers at long last signed union contracts, respecting workers' human dignity and granting a more livable wage.

In the years that followed, Cesar continued to use boycotts and fasts to galvanize farm workers in their pursuit of a better life, and to gather ordinary Americans' support for their efforts. Though they won the first and biggest battle in 1970, there were others. In 1988, at the age of sixty-one, Cesar undertook his last public fast, this time for thirty-six days, to draw attention to the pesticide poisoning of farm workers and their children. His whole life long, he was devoted to bettering the lives of farm workers, a cause he never gave up.

By some standards, Cesar Chavez was not very successful. He quit school after the eighth grade to help his family earn a living. He never owned a house and he never earned more than six thousand dollars a year. When he died in 1993, at sixty-six, he left no money for his family. Yet more than forty thousand people marched behind the plain pine casket at his funeral, and at an all-night vigil under a giant tent, thousands filed by his open casket until the morning. Parents carried newborn babies and sleeping toddlers in their arms. One farm worker explained, "I wanted to tell my children how they had once been in the presence of this great man."

A reporter once asked Cesar, "What accounts for all the affection and respect so many farm workers show you in public?" Cesar just looked down and smiled his easy smile. "The feeling is mutual" was his simple reply.

California is the first state to honor Cesar Chavez by creating a Day of

Service and Learning for his birthday. On March 31, join with people who are carrying on his legacy with conservation, human service, culture and arts, and community-improvement projects. Support the **United Farm Workers of America** and their nonviolent work to carry on Cesar Chavez's dream of dignity for farm workers across America by calling 661-823-6105, or visit their Web site, [www.ufw.org](http://www.ufw.org).