

Who was Cesar Chavez?

By Melody Arnst, MPT Development Coordinator

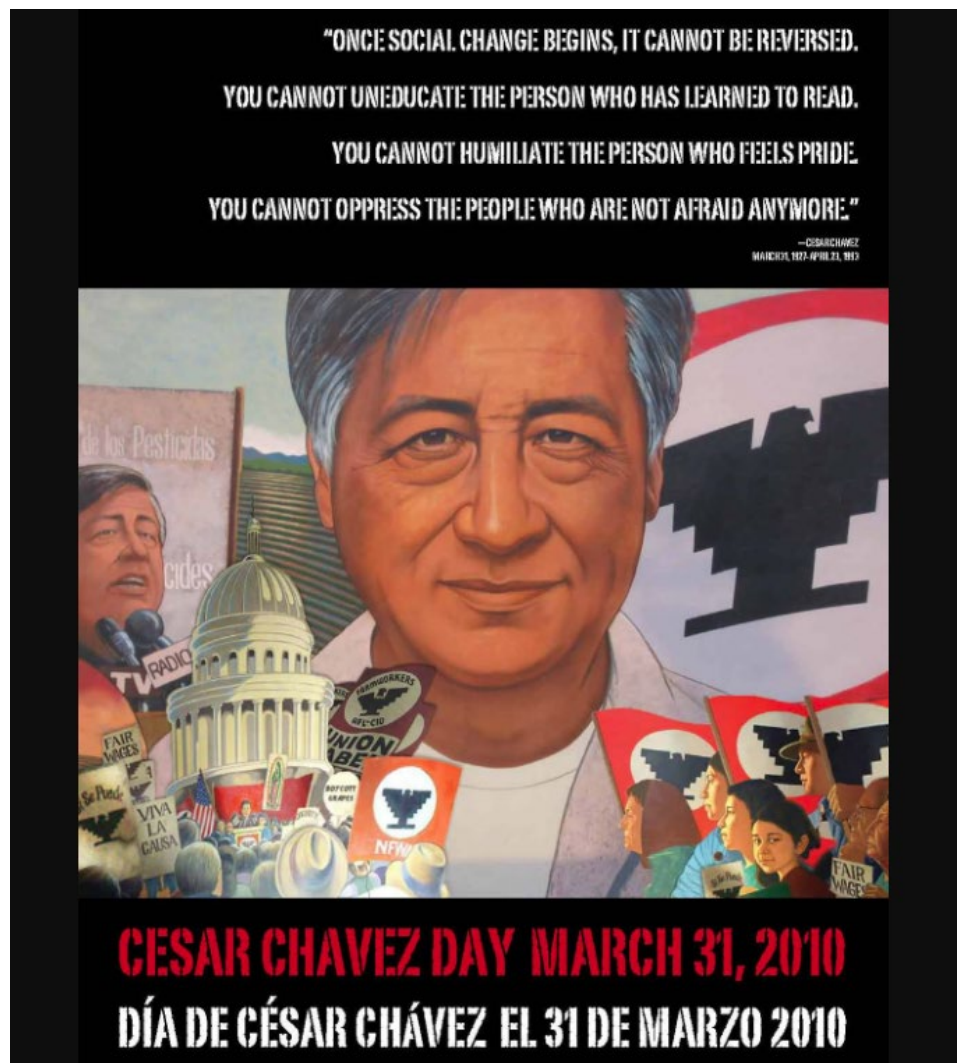
With it being Cesar Chavez's birthday, I wanted to learn more about him and his journey as a civil rights activist. My experience growing up in a small farming community and on a small family farm, also inspired me to learn more about Chavez and the impact he had on farmworkers. And as a peacemaker, I wanted to understand him, his journey, impact and dedication to nonviolence.

Chavez's journey began in his youth when his family lost their homestead in Yuma, Arizona during the Great Depression and was forced to move to northern California to work in the fields. It was hard work, and they did not live in the same place for long. At that time, the migrant farm workers provided a primary source of agricultural labor for California and the Southwest. Chavez saw firsthand the injustices migrant workers experienced. Child labor was rampant, growers often failed to provide bathrooms for workers and frequently housing—which the underpaid farmworkers were forced to occupy at exorbitant rates—had no plumbing or cooking facilities, they worked brutally long hours in the field, and were exposed to harmful pesticides. Farmworkers were not covered by minimum wage laws, and many made as little as 40 cents per hour, nor did they qualify for unemployment insurance. He watched the humiliation and poverty his own family suffered, including his father being turned away at stores and restaurants that would not serve Mexican Americans and his mother grow old working in the fields to ensure others were fed when they often went hungry.

At the age of 17, Chavez joined the U.S. Navy. After World War II and leaving the Navy, he returned to Delano, California, a community in San Joaquin Valley famous for its grapes. It was there that he met Helen Fabel. After marrying Fabel in 1948, Chavez found himself going back to work in the fields and suffering the same conditions he had hoped to leave behind.

In 1952, Chavez met Fred Ross, an organizer with the Community Service Organization (CSO), a Latino civil rights group. He spent the next 10 years learning how to become a grassroots organizer. Chavez worked to register new voters and fought racial and economic discrimination. He became a powerful speaker and leader within the CSO.

During his time with the CSO, Chavez met **Dolores Huerta**. Together Chavez and Huerta collaborated and co-founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA - later the United Farm Workers of America). Together they were formidable. They created the NFWA with the hope of creating a union to improve the conditions of the farmworkers, have their own indigenous leadership and to be directed by the farmworkers. It sounds so simple and yet it was a very difficult road to travel. As it has been with all civil rights activists that have stood firm against injustice and dedicated themselves to nonviolence, this was the beginning of a very difficult and long journey.



From 1931 to 1941, there were approximately 30 attempts to strike in California's San Joaquin Valley. These strikes were suppressed violently by growers and local law enforcement. Camps were burned, farmworkers beaten and even killed, and often arrested for something they "might" do. The fight for their rights were undermined and controlled by the growers.

In 1965, the NFWA joined in a strike against grape growers that began with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). The NFWA and AWOC eventually merged to become the **United Farm Workers of America** (UFWA). Chavez was inspired by and committed to the nonviolent civil disobedience of both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. They staged peaceful protests convincing workers to join the strike, they marched over 300 miles to Sacramento, and organized boycotts of grapes throughout the United States. A reporter followed Chavez during some of the marches and protests. She asked Chavez why the farmworkers showed him so much affection and respect. His response was that the feelings were mutual.

Chavez undertook a very well publicized 25-day hunger strike in 1968. During his fast, thousands of farmworkers came to pray in one of the largest vigils seen in California. On the 25th day, Bobby Kennedy returned to Delano to celebrate mass with Chavez as he took communion and broke his fast. This was only one of Chavez's many hunger strikes.

"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," Chavez declared, in a speech read on his behalf when his first hunger strike ended. *"To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us be men."*

By 1969, 17 million people stopped buying grapes. For 5 years, Chavez and the farmworkers marched, boycotted and fasted, trying to reach a collective bargaining agreement – the right to unionize, organize. By 1970, the growers formally recognized the United Farm Workers (UFW) and capitulated demands for decent wages and safer working conditions.

Chavez was also open in his support of the gay and lesbian population and their rights. Chavez believed in freedom and liberty for all regardless of gender, race and sexuality. Cesar Chavez fought against many bills that would have harmed the LGBTQ community, such as the Briggs Amendment which would have prevented gay or lesbian people from becoming teachers in California schools. According to his wife, Helen Chavez, *"My husband spent his life fighting for dignity for all people. César was one of the first civil rights leaders to speak out for gays and lesbians, because he understood that you can't demand equality for your own people while tolerating discrimination against anyone else."*

Cesar Estrada Chavez died on April 29, 1993. He was honored in death by those he led during life. More than 50,000 mourners came to honor Chavez. For the last time, they came to march by the side of the man who taught them to stand up for their rights through nonviolent protests and collective bargaining.

While learning about Cesar Chavez, I spent a lot of time reflecting and discussing what I learned with my father. He also grew up working in the fields of his own family farm and I grew up on the farm my Mom and Dad built. I know firsthand of the hard labor involved in growing and harvesting; however, I cannot fathom the hardships and humiliation that the farmworkers endured. Cesar Chavez is an inspiration to me, and I am honored to be able to share his story.

As Luis Valdez said, *"Cesar, we have come to plant your heart like a seed . . . the farm workers shall harvest in the seed of your memory."*

Resources:

<https://www.history.com/topics/mexico/cesar-chavez>

<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/cesar-chavez-dolores-huerta-and-the-united-farm-workers>

From Fields to Victory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb93EX94q1w>

<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/cesar-chavez-dolores-huerta-and-the-united-farm-workers>

<https://ufw.org/research/history/story-cesar-chavez/>

<http://www.freedomtomarry.org/blog/entry/voice-for-equality-helen-chavez>

Civil Women – Women's History Month: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2UHL7XKBLs>