

Taking the Blame

By LeRoy Chatfield



Photo: Jon Lewis ©

LeRoy Chatfield (sunglasses) was the most trusted and closest assistant to Cesar Chavez'.

Fortunately for me, I was not one of the key volunteers who needed to be pushed out of the farmworker movement. I left long before I wore out my welcome. But had I stayed, and I certainly had the opportunity to do so, the time would certainly have come when my personal priorities would have clashed with the needs of the movement, and I would be out, friend or no friend of Cesar Chavez.

I do not deserve much credit for my voluntary departure, because I had a foreshadowing of what lay ahead for me. After Cesar's funeral in 1993, I wrote a manuscript, which I entitled "Cesar, 1968." In this document, I recount a conversation Cesar and I had late in the evening the night before the 1972 California general election, an election which would determine the fate of Proposition 22, the anti-union initiative sponsored by California agribusiness to outlaw farm labor unions.



I wrote, “So there we were, just Cesar and me, sitting in the big open room of our ‘No on 22’ campaign headquarters looking out onto Olympic Boulevard five stories below. It was very late in the evening, everyone had gone home or back to our farmworker encampment at Lincoln Park to get some rest for another early morning of human billboarding and our ‘Get Out the Vote’ drive. Cesar was tired, and very nervous about the upcoming election. I was very uptight myself, and wondered if there was any last-minute campaigning that we could do. Just a few days before, with the help of our Hollywood media contacts, I had been able to arrange for a 30-second ‘Cesar No on 22 spot’ to be aired on the Archie Bunker show. It was very expensive, I forget how much, but all the media experts said it was worth it, and a coup to even break into the show. I remember being afraid to blink for fear I would miss it.

“Cesar spoke very softly with a friendly but nervous edge to his voice. He simply explained to me that if we lost the election tomorrow, I would have to take the blame. I couldn’t answer. I was totally silenced by the harsh reality of what he had said. I was completely helpless. My closest friend, almost nine years now, had just explained the political facts of life to me. I had worked on this life and death campaign full-time since July, barely had any time to even see Bonnie and the girls, unless she was in the office working. I worked very late into the night plotting strategy on the telephone with my staff directors in other California cities, and then worrying half to death about everything because of the high stakes involved for Cesar and his farmworker union. Now, to top it all off, I was expected to play the role of a fall guy, the person responsible for this historical defeat. I didn’t answer Cesar. I just nodded and gave a shrug of the shoulders.

“The union won! Proposition 22 was defeated 58% to 42%. (Nixon beat McGovern 54% to 40%). I did not feel like coming to the victory celebration because I am very uncomfortable at those kinds of events, but I did make an appearance at the tail



end of the party. But everyone was pretty drunk by that time, and thank God, all of the speeches were over. I didn't have to stay long.

Cesar tried to make it up to me. The farmworker union had a big 'Welcome Home/Thank You' dinner party in my honor for all the staff and their families at La Paz. There was a banner in the dining room that called me a 'Giant Killer,' and Cesar made a big to-do about my work in the campaign and how I saved the union from the power of the growers.

But I was mature enough to know that just because Proposition 22 had been defeated, it made me no more a 'Giant Killer' than, had it won, I would have been the person to blame. Winning or losing Proposition 22 wasn't about me, or my friendship with Cesar, it was about him and his relationship with his vision, his farmworker movement. That was the only thing that mattered.

I remember this incident as clearly today as if it happened last night. And I'm grateful that it happened, because it helped to spare me from the day, which surely would have come, when Cesar and I would have been forced to part company. I did not leave the farmworker movement because of this incident, but it certainly helped to lay the groundwork for my voluntary departure the following year. The conversation that evening, high above Olympic Boulevard, reminded me again that this was not my cause, I had only come to the farmworker movement to help Cesar with his cause.



CESAR CHAVEZ SERVICE CLUB
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LeRoy Chatfield makes a point at a community meeting at the farmworker's La Paz retreat headquarters in Keene, CA, twenty miles east of Bakersfield, CA.

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The most difficult part of my decision to leave was the keen realization that I would have to give up my 10-year friendship with Cesar Chavez. Because of his all-consuming commitment to the cause of the farmworkers, he would no longer be a close friend. I knew it, I understood it, and I accepted the consequences of my decision. I felt a great sense of loss, and still do.

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For primary source information regarding Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union, and those who built the farmworkers movement, go online to www.farmworkermovement.us.

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