

Interview with Tomás A. Villanueva
Interviewed by Anne O'Neill, April 11, 2003
Interviewed by Sharon Walker, June 7, 2004
Toppenish, Washington

I was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico on December 21, 1941. My father Celestino Tristan Villanueva was a mason. My mother Eva Ayala Villanueva was a homemaker, but did some sewing on the side. In Mexico in the 50's, there was this aura about the United States that you could make a lot of money in the USA. My parents wanted to provide the best for us as their children. We had our own home. My mother was born in Corsicana, Texas, USA, but she was taken to Mexico during the Depression of the 1930's, so she was raised in Mexico. She spoke no English. My folks decided to immigrate to the USA. They worked out the arrangements – they ended up selling everything they had for us to come to the United States.

It was difficult. We were raised in Monterrey, which is a very big industrial city; we had really never worked in the fields. But in order for my folks to be able to obtain the proper documents, they had to have a letter from an employer in the United States saying they were willing to give us at least three years of employment, basically so we would not become a public burden. It was a labor contractor by the name of Don Antonio that gave my Dad the letter. My dad was a man of his word; he was able to get a job in Texas as a mason, but he gave his word to this man.

I remember we arrived September 5th of 1955 to Reynosa Tamaulipas, which borders with the USA Hidalgo Port of Entry into the USA, but it happened to be Labor Day, so the border was closed – not closed – but they were not processing any papers. So we stayed over in Reynosa Tamaulipas overnight that Monday and came across Tuesday. When I first arrived to the United States, we came to a little community called La Hielera, which means, “ice box.” That's what it is. They used to make ice there. La Hielera neighborhood was about two miles west of Edinburg, Texas. Within a week, the labor contractor took us over to Fort Worth and Leveland, Texas to pick cotton. We didn't make much money. We were not farm workers. In the cotton fields of Forth Worth, Texas I remember that there were a lot of jack rabbits, after we finished the work day, my brother Alfonso and I would chase and catch rabbits to take home for mom to cook. We ate a lot of jackrabbits in those times.

We came back sometime in November of same year to the Rio Grande Valley, which is where Edinburg is located, I remember my folks didn't want us to lose any school, so they put us in school right away. My brother Alfonso didn't want to go, but I went. I was enrolled at Edinburg Lincoln Elementary School. It was kind of terrible for me because I was doing really good in school in Mexico and I already took one year in college, because in Mexico in those times, you only went up to sixth grade, after that you go to a commercial institute like Perry Trade, a private college or you go to a government school to further your education. I wanted to become a public accountant in those times. So I studied one year of public accounting at the Instituto de Ciencias Mercantiles (a private business college) and here I come to the US at the age of

fourteen and I am placed in the first grade with all these six year-old little kids because I couldn't speak the language. It was difficult for me to be with a whole bunch of small children.

My dad had a job by that time, which was with a construction contractor, but then it became March, and the labor contractor said that he needed us to go to the State of Ohio. So we traveled with the contractor. In those times we did not have a car. We didn't even know how to drive. So he took us in the back of a truck. We counted - there were about 30 people in that truck, and the labor contractor took us to the State of Ohio. I remember that during the trip it rained most of the time and we got all wet like crazy. We end up in Ohio to work the sugar beets, something that we really knew nothing about. We arrived at this labor camp, which was about two miles from a little town, by the name of Pandora, Ohio. There was nothing there. It was kind of little forest type (which in Spanish they called borames) in the center of the field and that's where the labor camp was. In Ohio, during those years I noticed that labor camps were mostly located in the middle of "this little forest" fill with pine trees maples, wild apple trees and other trees and bushes. And here we came and ended up in the middle of nowhere in a labor camp with no electricity, no running water – nothing, we had no car nor did we know how to drive. The labor contractor was forced to go back to Texas by the State Department of Health, as I understood at that time. He had some kind of a medical problem, so he had to go back to Texas, and only our family (my folks and siblings, my sister and her husband, aunt Petrita and Uncle Jose and Aunt Maria and Cousin Angel remained there. At the moment, the contractor, Don Antonio, wanted us to come back with him, but my dad told him, "You charged us hundred and fifty dollars to come here, you want to charge another hundred and fifty dollars to go back, and we haven't even started to work." The sugar beet company's general labor manager Señor Solis was desperate for workers and pleaded for my folks to stay, on the side Señor Solis happened to be also a "used care salesman". Señor Solis offered my dad to sell him a car, it was a 1949 Pontiac for a hundred dollars with the stipulation that dad did not have to pay anything until the sugar beet harvest was over and that if dad did not want to keep the car he could just return it and dad will owe nothing. Dad accepted the offer. So we took the car, but left it at the end of the season. Poor car – because every one of us had to learn to drive, including my folks, my brothers and sisters, my brother in-law, my aunts and uncles. And that means we often went into potholes, went off the road. That poor car, by the time we finished with it, it was in shambles. I remember that after finishing the sugar beets on that farm, we go out to other places to work and we used to travel, up to 15 of us in that car, to go to work. We packed inside and then open the truck and we'd have another 4 or 5 more people in the trunk with our hoes and everything. In the State of Ohio we tried to stay as long as possible working hoeing the sugar beets, cleaning – (which is weeding it). We did some of the cucumber season – picking cucumbers, tomatoes. And toward the end of the season we finally made enough that we bought us a car. We didn't keep the '49. There was not a chance that the car would make it back to Texas. We stayed there. We worked in the sugar beet industry – hoeing beets. Hoeing beets was miserable. For one thing, we had never done it before, we hardly made enough money to eat. We had these hoes that were six inches wide and had a small handle about twelve inches long, it was nothing but stoop

labor, We were supposed to leave only one little plant every six inches apart. Of course, often we would hit the plant, and we didn't realize that as long as you didn't knock the plant off that the plant would come up itself – it would stand up. So we would gather dirt around it and make sure that it was standing up. but we did such good work hoeing that when it came the season for sugar beet weeding it was a breeze, after the sugar beet season we moved to another labor camp to work picking cucumbers and then to Ontario, Ohio to pick tomatoes, my family worked at the cannery. I work picking tomatoes because I wasn't old enough to work in the cannery. At the end of the work season in late October we managed to save enough money to buy a car, dad returned the '49 Pontiac for there was no chance that the Pontiac would make it back to Texas, and bought a 1952 Ford. My uncle and brother in law also bought each their own car, which were both 1951 Fords.

We came back to Texas in November again, and I went back to school. I remember that time we moved to McAllen, Texas. In McAllen, they put me in the third grade this time, instead of the first grade. In Mexico, I was very good in math, and as I mentioned earlier I had taken one year in college in Mexico. The discipline in that college was very strict, so you really have to pay attention to what the teacher was telling you and you had to be good at stuff, so I was super good in math – not bragging about it, but I was very good. So when they put me in the third grade and the teacher tried to tell me about math, I was way far ahead of her, and I often embarrassed her. She hadn't finished putting the problem on the blackboard and I already had the answer, so she just sent me over to the sixth grade, but I still didn't know how to speak and read English [laughter].

Then came March of the following year (1957), the contractor said he wanted for us to come over this time to Washington, to work on the asparagus. The commitment was to work for three years, straight with him. So we drove over to the State of Washington. He loaned us, fifty dollars for the gas, I didn't know until later that the company, which they used to call it Cal-Pac, the California Packing Company, which is now Del Monte, they used to give thirty dollars per worker for travel expenses to come over. And you if you finish half the season you didn't owe anything, and if you finish the season they give you another thirty dollars per person so you can go back to Texas. But the contractor never told us. He just loaned us fifty dollars, which was deducted from our first pay check. There were five workers in just our family to work. We should have received one hundred and fifty dollars to travel to Washington and another one hundred and fifty to return to Texas, but as I mentioned the contractor kept all the travel money.

So we came to Washington. Again, we were put in this little shanty labor camp, which was just two miles North of Toppenish, between Toppenish and Wapato. This was one of some twenty-labor camps owned and operated by the company, I should mention that this labor camp was no different than the ones we lived in Ohio, Oregon, Idaho and Arizona. There was just a one room cabin with bunk beds and a wood stove for cooking, with cracks all over the walls. We had to carry the water for cooking from a central water faucet and had only one outside shower for men and one for women—there were about sixty workers living in this same labor camp. In those times Cal Pak was the major

employer and owned their asparagus fields and processed their own asparagus. They employed around six hundred asparagus cutters and close to the same number in their processing plant. We finished the harvest, and of course we never saw the other thirty dollars per person, but we didn't want to just travel to cut asparagus and go back home. We tried to do as much as we could, following the crops like many other farm workers.

I say "following the crops" rather than saying the word "migrant." I don't like the word migrant. To me a migrant, it's like the swallow, or the elk, animals that travel by instinct. Every year we have the swallow that comes from California and comes to a specific place and they give birth to the little ones and the little ones come back year after year to the same place. I feel that we are not migrants. We don't travel by instinct. Farm workers travel to where ever there are better opportunities. Plus the fact, that in those times the fruit growers would not hire Mexican farm workers to work in warehouses or pick fruit. They were strictly for white workers from Arkansas and Oklahoma, "Arkies and the Okies" as they used to call them. That's one of the reasons we traveled. Mexicans were supposed to do just stoop labor, i.e. hoeing and weeding sugar beets, asparagus cutting, working on the hop fields, picking spuds, etcetera.

Sometimes we would finish [cutting asparagus] early, so we'd work hoeing sugar beets, because sugar beet work could be done late in the day. After the sugar beet and asparagus season, which ended in the middle of June, they wouldn't give us work-picking cherries, which was the next crop that follows asparagus. So some of us Mexican workers would go to the coast down by Mt. Vernon to work on the strawberries and other harvests. Often we used to go to Salem, Oregon to pick green beans. Then we'd come back and work in the hops for the hop harvest. When the hop harvest was over, we used to pick potatoes. We would work on that until it was over - sometime like late September, mid-October. Then we would go to Idaho, mostly around Burley, Idaho – that's a big potato harvest there. We would pick up the spuds over in Idaho from then until the end of November. In the middle of December we went down to Arizona to pick cotton, then go back to Texas. We would go back to school and then by March we went back to the state of Washington.

My dad and my mom wanted very much for us kids to go to school to get an education. They were very concerned, especially for my younger sister Delfina and brother Vicente (Jesse). For three years, they had been going to first grade in school and never got out of first grade, because we were never long enough in one place so they could actually get any kind of a grade. So my dad decided, "Well, we have to settle someplace, so it might as well be here." So we settled in Toppenish in 1958.

I tried to go to school here in Toppenish, but to be honest with you, I didn't make it because the Mexican people who were already established here, they had come from Wyoming and other areas. They were established and their parents were no longer farm workers. They kind of looked down on people that were farm workers. Especially if they were living in labor camps. They would laugh at you. So, [the] discrimination [I experienced] was part of that. I said, "I'm not going to go to school here." Although I did.

My first encounter with discrimination was in Ohio, this time by white people. We were in this labor camp in Ottawa, Ohio. I remember everybody was from Texas in those times, and of course I came from Texas, but I wasn't from Texas, I was from Mexico. I had never really lived in Texas. All these Mexican kids were crazy about football. It was football season, so they invite me to go to this football game. It was a high school football game. We went and they threw us out because we were Mexicans. I just felt terrible. I'd never been discriminated. In Mexico, it's all Mexicans. To tell you that you're not allowed because you're Mexican, you're another race. I'll tell you, it kind of helped me, because my wife has never been a football widow [laughs] because I never attended football games. I don't enjoy looking at them. I attended when my kids were growing up and they were in football games, and I'd go there to sit there and support them, but I still don't understand how to play the game. I just went there to be with my kids.

That was the first discrimination. Then I came here and had discrimination by Mexicans because they spoke English without any accents.

We stayed the winter and I remember they didn't hire us during the harvest of apples. We would work in the winters, making hay bales and even loading hay bales. I remember it was the first time I took a job as a truck driver. In those times they didn't have the hay bale machines. Now you got the baler and you pick up the alfalfa and the hay and make the bales. In those times we made big piles and we just, with a fork, all winter long, put it into a machine to make hay bales. I remember the foreman told me, he says, "Can you drive a truck?" And I said, "No, I can't." And he said, "I only want you to drive it one block." "Oh, OK, just one block." So I only drove it one block. So the next year, in 1959, I didn't want to work in the hop fields, cutting vines and everything, so I asked for a job as a truck driver. And they told me, "Have you ever driven a truck?" [And I said], "Yeah, I have." So, they gave me the job as a truck driver. I made it pretty good. I got into a wreck with somebody else, but fortunately they blamed it on the other guy [laughs].

In those times there were also a lot of white people, volunteer teachers, who would volunteer classes for Mexicans to learn English. They were not government programs, just people who volunteered themselves. So, every time I had a chance I would attend those classes.

I didn't want to work at home in the fields. For one, the pay was very low and the work was kind of hard, and I had an opportunity to work with the railroad in Oregon in 1960. That's because my sister-in-law's father happened to be a foreman on the railroad and had got [my brother] a job on the railroad when my brother married her. And then they got me into the railroad, but it was what they call an "extra gang"¹. There was a group of people that all lived together on railroad cars, and they would take us from one place to another. If we were going to take a certain job they moved us over. So he got me a

¹ The crew of track laborers assigned to maintenance work at various points on a railroad right-of-way. These employees may live in camp (bunk) cars where they are provided lodging and meals at a nominal cost.

job on one of these extra gangs and it was a good experience. I got a job called a “gandy dancer².”

Nobody spoke any Spanish in that camp, and I could barely understand a few words in English. I think I’d like to mention this because it’s very important... the people that were hired there were mostly from – I don’t know if you know what they were – these Skid Row guys were from the skid rows of Portland. Much of them were people they called “bums” and “hobos” – now they call them “homeless,” but you know I got a great respect for these people. I think that society really comes down on them and they’re just a bunch of great people, every one that I met, although some would be there only for two or three weeks, some would be there for a year or two. In general, they were highly educated, but something happened in their life that affected them so bad that they just went down to the bottom and never got out, but since I had to live with them, they started teaching me, giving me classes in English, even some algebra – all the things that when I got out of the railroad to go to school, I was able to pass my GED test without going to school here. So I have a great respect for the people, because something happened in their life – something they could not handle or whatever. They are people that have all my respect.

When I went to college here, I had a hard time with my counselors at Yakima Valley Community College because I told them at that time my mother used to be very ill and for some time I wanted to be a doctor. I said, “Maybe I want to find something that can cure my mom,” because my mother was sick most of her life, since I can remember. So I told my counselors, and they said, “Well, you have to take pre-medicine courses and you have to take trigonometry and algebra, chemistry, biology, zoology.”

“So, that’s fine. Sign the form.”

“But you cannot take trigonometry without taking a geometry course, and you have never taken geometry. And you cannot take Algebra 101 because you have never taken algebra – you have to take Algebra 100. You cannot take Chemistry 101 because you have never taken chemistry in high school – you have to take Chemistry 100.”

I said, “Wait a minute. What’s the difference between 100 and 101?”

They said, “Well, the 100s are high school classes. That means you don’t get any credit for them.”

I said, “Listen. I quit a good-paying job. I got my GED. That’s supposed to be a high-school equivalency. I’m not about to take high school classes to enroll.”

He said, “Well, you are going to fail every one of them if you take them.”

I said, “Well, why don’t you let me fail, on my own? You are trying to fail me already by telling me that I cannot take them.”

² A track laborer assigned to work on an extra-gang.

So, he was really reluctant, but he allowed me to take those classes, and I got straight As and Bs in every one, except English. English has always been difficult [laughter]. I think the most I ever got in English was a “C,” but chemistry and trigonometry were no problem and I ended up taking calculus. About the second year, when I was working full-time, I used to work at— now we call it the Chinese Towers, but at that time it was the Chinook Hotel. So I was working full-time there and going full-time to school. Then in the second year, one of my counselors told me, “I understand you want to go to the University of Washington.”

I said, “Yeah, that’s correct.”

He says, “Well, do you know the University of Washington will never take anybody with a GED, until you have a high school diploma?”

Naturally, I said, “I’ve already taken a year and a half of college, I have already taken calculus. What would I want to finish that for?”

He says, “Yeah, you have to have a high school diploma in order to get into the university.”

So I rearranged my work schedule at my job and started taking classes at Davis High School in Yakima. Here, I had a year and a half in college, and I was taking high school classes so that I could make the requirements at the University of Washington. After three months, Dick Lord, a teacher – very nice – one of my mathematics teachers, found out what I was doing and says, “What are you doing there?”

I said, “Well, this is what the counselor says.”

He says, “That’s nonsense. The university will not take a straight GED into the university, but you’re already doing college, you know, you don’t have to.”

As I was mentioning, that time in college, that’s where I met Lupe Gamboa. We were not more than a handful of Mexicans that attended YVC [Yakima Valley College]. Lupe and I were taking pretty much the same kind of classes because he was going to work as a lab technician and I was talking about pre-medicine classes and pretty much the same classes – chemistry, zoology, and biology – so we became good friends.

When we applied to the University of Washington, because we both wanted to go up there, we looked for work in the summer, and there was a job opening in the first programs under Community Action, which was through the Office of Economic Opportunity. So we applied for the job supposedly as community organizers for a program that was called Operation Grassroots. We worked for a while there and it was kind of boring because actually all that we were doing was passing surveys, which means house to house, with people in the community, and our job was to do the surveys and to find out what the people’s needs were – not that we were really doing

anything about it, to be honest with you. Then at the same time, we started hearing a lot about Cesar Chavez and the national farm workers association out of California. A lot of what we were hearing through the news media was negative. It was about this power-hungry Mexican, about this communist, [so] that Lupe and I decided to take time off and really go and visit and find out what this man, Cesar Chavez, was all about. So we left. We went to California, to Delano, and after asking directions all over, we finally found the place. We expected a nice office, you know. I mean, the guy was already known nationally. We expected him to be in a nice office and we end up in an old run-down neighborhood, a run-down house. There was his office. We went up in there and asked for him and he came out himself, in a real humble way, and he says, "I'm Cesar Chavez. What can I do for you boys?"

Lupe and I explained, "Well, we come from the state of Washington. We heard a lot about you, but all we hear is from the news media and we'd like to hear it from you – what is with you and farm workers in the state of California?"

"Well, if guys want to know about what I'm doing and what we are doing here, instead of me telling you, why don't you just stay and work with me for a couple of weeks?"

So Lupe and I agreed to work for a couple of weeks. I remember we stayed with just a blanket on a concrete floor in a house with a broken window. At that time there was going to be an election at DiGiorgio Farms, and if I'm not mistaken, it was the first election ever to be held on a farm. There were people smuggling workers as scabs so they would vote against the union, and Brother Cesar asked us, "If you like, you can help us to see if we can find out where the scabs are coming in. So I want you guys to leave by five o'clock in the morning for Fresno (Fresno is 75 mi from Delano)."

So, Lupe and I will go there, and I remember Lupe would get on the bus (because out there they had a system for labor contractors – they will go with a bus to certain streets and get the people to go to work to different places. So Lupe would get on the bus and I would drive the car at a certain distance to see where the workers were going, but we couldn't find out. Then one day within those two weeks, we were in Fresno with Lupe, Fred Ross, Jr., and a few other of the organizers, and we were trying to figure it out – we needed to find out because the election was coming soon so we [could] stop it. I remember there was this Mexican brother arguing with a Black brother in front of a tavern, and it seemed to be a pretty heated argument. The Mexican brother had a wooden leg and used a cane and I remember that Fred Ross, Jr., said, "That guy knows how they are smuggling people into the farm."

So I said, "Well, why don't we ask him?"

He says, "He knows all of us, and the minute we ask about the smuggling or scabs, he's a very violent person. He just goes at us with the cane, you know, so that's no way to approach him."

I remember that Lupe said, "Oh, Tomás is pretty good about that – getting information from people like that." So he asked me, "Why don't you try it?"

So I walked and just laid back on the wall of the tavern and let these two guys have it out. They were not fighting – fist fighting – they were just arguing really bad, and then the Black brother I guess he just gave up on the argument and just decided to walk.

So this guy started saying, "Ah, those son-of-a-bitch friends of mine. They say that they're going to back you up, and when you need them, they're never there," and just blabbering it out about friends that are supposed to be helping him or supporting him.

I let him kind of vent himself out and halfway through that I said, "Yeah, that's the way friends are. You can't count on them when you need them. The same thing has happened to me."

And he looks around, "Isn't that true!" he said. "Yeah." So he started talking to me and says, "Yeah, those friends of mine."

"Well," I said, "that happens all the time."

"I'm not afraid of Black people. Are you afraid?"

"No, no, I'm not afraid."

"Let's walk through the middle of them, just to show them."

Uh-oh. I had told my friends the organizers, "I will give it a try, but don't stay too far away from me." There were ten or twelve people - Black brothers - on the side of the street, and there was the guy that had the argument with his friends, this person (the Mexican guy said).

"Let's go and walk through them," he says. Uh-oh. And I look back to see if Lupe and Fred and the rest were close by, and they were. So we walked right through it. Fortunately, this guy did not insult them and the other guys did not pick a fight with him, so we just walked right through the middle, like nothing happened. I was kind of sweating, to be honest with you, but then after we passed through, he asked me a question, "You know, you don't seem to be from this area."

I said, "No, I'm not. I am from the state of Washington."

He says, "Well, what are you doing here?"

I said, "I'm looking for a brother of mine. I have a brother that used to contact us quite often. It's been two weeks since my mother heard from him. She's really worried about him. So she asked me to come and look for him."

“Well, where is your brother supposed to be?”

I said, “Well, he’s supposed to be in such-and-such a farm,” which was the DiGiorgio farm.

He said, “Well, have you tried to go in?”

I said, “Well, yes, but those son-of-a-guns from the union don’t let me go through. They think that I am a scab because I’m not part of them, and they just won’t let me go through the entrances. And all I want is to go inside to find out if my brother is there. But those damn guys, they just won’t let me go through.”

He says, “Well, don’t worry now. Come back tomorrow at five o’clock in the morning, go to such-and-such a street, and get inside a bus and they will take you there.”

And that’s how we found out a guy by the name of Ortiz had been smuggling the scabs. It was a pretty exciting thing. We saw some of the things that Brother Cesar was doing - the gasoline co-ops and things. We saw a lot of action. And one of the things that Brother Cesar was [saying was that] nothing is going to change in the conditions of farm workers unless farm workers themselves do the changes.

When we came back, my job became even more boring, and I realized that. We were just asking for surveys - what the needs of the people were, and the people were not really participating. We were just trying to see what we could do for them, instead of what they can do for themselves.

So as part of the job, I organized a community center and got funded for it and became the director. It was called the Mid Valley Community Center, here in Toppenish. But I also started organizing an independent group. It was the United Farm Workers Co-op, and I use the name United Farm Workers Co-op, based on the farm workers in California. It was completely non-governmental. I convinced people to give \$5 into their shares and I got very successful. I got enough that would build a little store. It was very small to start with and we started running a sort of service defending people when growers did not pay their wages or when people got injured. We got people to get food stamps and those things. Then we found a bigger building for the co-op. It was a building that had been burned down - it had part of the roof was burned down and part of the inside - but it was a nice building that would fit us perfectly right and have plenty of parking space and the owner of it says, “Well, tell you what, Tomás, if you guys fix it up, that will be the down payment, and you don’t have to pay me anything for a year. And then you can start paying your monthly payments.” So we did some fundraisers - dances and whatever, and got people to put more \$5 shares, and then we got a whole bunch of volunteers from the community, including my dad, which was big help, and the person that later became my father-in-law, and quite a few other people. We all worked on it, and finished the roof and everything and we opened a brand-new store and most of the profits were used up to fight social injustice. To my knowledge there is no other

organization other than the co-op that first assisted the first Mexican students to go to the University of Washington.

In those times, there was a group of Black brothers from the University of Washington, who, right from the beginning of affirmative action came over and they had this kind of job thing... the university would pay so much if you hired students. At that time we did not have a Chicano Studies program at the University of Washington, but there was a Black Studies program, and the Black brothers really wanted to get Mexicans into the university. So they came to us and said, "Can you help us? The university will pay 50% of the wages of whatever you pay to workers - potential students. So we worked with them for three years. We sent at least 13 students per year to the University of Washington and what we did - I can say it now because it's too late for them to do anything to me anymore - we paid them more than twice the minimum wage. We didn't have money to pay ourselves. We had arrangements with the students. "On paper, we're going to pay you so much so the university can pay half of it, and we pay you that half." We were pretty successful until the third year, when a couple of students decided to complain. They went to the IRS and they almost took everything away from us.

But by that time, I had also organized the Farm Workers Family Health Center, which is now the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic. Also in those times, Yakima County used to run what used to be Migrant Health, but it was just a little pet project that used to get funded something like \$30,000 a year. They'd spend \$15-20,000, like maybe \$15,000 on hiring a nurse and maybe \$5,000 buying aspirin or prescriptions, and usually send the rest of the money back. Well, by that time, I had got very much involved with a group in Washington, D.C. that was called the Center for Community Change and actually they were the ones that said, "Tomás, there is money for Migrant Health Centers not just little projects. There is a new act that these funds can be operated by nonprofit organizations. You want to go for it?"

I contacted the different organizations, nonprofits. They thought it was an impossible task. Nobody wanted to get involved, until afterwards. So, I said, "Well, let's go for it, and we'll do it, and we'll do it under the name of the United Farm Workers Service Center. And then we can get the farm workers to create and start a nonprofit." By that time, through Dave Cohen, who was from the Center for Community Change, I had been introduced to Senator Warren Magnuson, who used to be known as "Maggie," the most powerful Senator that's ever been from the state of Washington and in Washington, D.C. He was the head of appropriations and I had got to know him personally and had a good relationship with him. So I had Dave Cohen from the Center for Community Change and then they sent me also Jim Holland, another great friend, from California, also with the Center for Community Change. So, between the three of us and an analyst from HEW, which is now HHS. HEW was "Health, Education and Welfare." Now it's "Health and Human Services" - same agency, but they changed the name over the years. This lady, Dorothy Davis - she's dead now - she was a great lady, we spent days and nights working on that proposal, to put a health center together. Then I went to different agencies - to DSHS, Department of Health Services, and to Employment Security. And then they bought into it. As a matter of fact, Employment

Security appointed one of the workers, Ray Esparza, who used to be a medic in the Vietnam War, and told him, "Just work with Tomás. Tomás talks about organizing and talks about healthcare and you can be a good team." So we pretty much worked as a team. We submitted the application and first we were supposed to, at least as a courtesy, submit the plan to the county commissioners. And by that time, I had been doing a lot of hell raising, you could say, that the commissioners knew me pretty well and they hated me - they didn't really like me. So when I asked them to put me on the agenda, they put me on the agenda; but when I went to speak, I wanted to present the proposal, but I remember the chairman, Les Conrad at that time, said, "Well, Tomás, you are on the agenda. You can make your presentation, but you should understand that we're not supporting anything and we're not even going to listen to what you have to say."

I said, "Well, in that case, there's no sense in wasting my time speaking," and left the place. Everybody viewed the United Farm Workers Co-op and the United Farm Workers Service Center kind of as the counterpart of the UFW in California - that we were a part of it. We had no connection at that time. But they're all connected to a great fear, because we had the same name and we had the same cause. And the John Birch Society was very strong over here. As well there was an organization that formed under the name of Taxpayers of America, so there was a lot of opposition.

Katherine May, who was our congresswoman at that time, opposed very fiercely our proposal. So did the county commissioners, the medical society, the dental society, and the optometry society. I remember that the Center for Community Change paid my way to go to Washington, D.C., primarily to lobby senators on [behalf of] the health center, and I met with Senator Magnuson and his staff. Senator Magnuson told one of his aides, "Go tell Norman Dicks (who is now a congressman down on the West Coast) and Harley Dirks. Just call HEW and tell them that Maggie wants that center funded." They called right there before I left. That was the one thing about Senator Magnuson, like no other. I wouldn't call him a politician. He was a true public official. When you go and ask him for something, he will never tell you, "Well, let me think about it and I will let you know. He can tell you right away, and he will take action so that whatever he was going to do you will know before you left his office, not the sort of guy who says, "Well, I'll let you know about it. Let me look into it. It will take two or three weeks." Senator Magnuson was not that kind of guy. He was a true public servant - really concerned.

Anyway, I came back to Washington and within a week or so I received a letter from HEW saying that the center was funded. They were going to give us some \$365,000, which in those times was - compared to the \$30,000 that they were receiving - was a lot of money. A few days after I received the letter, actually, just following the letter, I got a call from HEW, saying, "Will you please not make the letter public, because Congressman May is contesting the decision. You got the funding, no problem with that," they said, "but she wants to have a hearing in Yakima County, so we'd like her to have a chance to have a hearing, but you have the money."

OK, so I wouldn't make it public. Well, they started saying that the Farm Workers Health Center was to unionize workers, then that it was strictly for Mexicans, and in those times, there were a lot of Anglo farm workers, there were Native Americans, and there were Black brothers - also workers. So, Katherine May had her hearing, and we had a hundred people at that hearing. And the same accusations - whether or not we had a whole bunch of Anglo workers supporting us and a bunch of Black brothers supporting us, and a bunch of Native American brothers supporting us. So they couldn't have that argument. So then the argument was that there was really no need for the health center - whatever resources were available were more than enough. And another one was how could a bunch of Mexicans - farm workers - run a health center?

So I remember I answered the question at that time, "Well, who runs the Health Department," which is all the mayors of the cities. "Do they have any medical background?" "No," I said, "That's why they have a medical director. You think we are going to be the ones doing prescriptions and medical screening for people? We intend to hire also our own professionals."

But when they started saying that there was really not much need - that was Ed Wilmuth. He was at that time with what is Del Monte Corporation now that used to be called Cal-Pac, California Packing Company. In those times, they had all their own asparagus. Now they contract with growers, so they don't plant anymore. But at those times they planted their own and they were the largest employer in terms of asparagus harvesting. Ed Wilmuth was the head honcho for that department, and he was at that meeting. I knew how he was. I talked him into it by asking him the question, "You know, Mr. Wilmuth, you are the largest employer in Yakima County, and you are the one that hasn't said a single thing about whether there is a need for a farm workers' clinic or not."

And he stood up and screamed, "Farm workers don't need a medical clinic! They have pretty strong backs. All they need is a box of aspirins." Dr. Dornnick was on the forum. Dr. Dornnick happened to be our family doctor at that time, and I said, "Hey Dr. Dornnick, I didn't know that that's all you're giving us and charging us so much for."

"Oh no, that's not the way it is, Tomás."

So that pretty much ended the debate. Then they wanted to change it, but they said they would support us, kind of as a last alternative, under the conditions that the county health board will run the clinic and that we farm workers would form an advisory committee. I said, "No. How about you guys be the advisory committee and we be the policy-makers?"

"Well, but you guys won't listen to us."

"That's exactly right. Advisory committees are not to be listened to, just to hear them [the policies]." We got the clinic already, you know, and it was great.

Also, in those times, farm workers were the only ones left out of workmen's compensation. Farm workers back in 1969 were not covered. If somebody got injured on the job, they could sue the employer, but there were no attorneys to take their cases - not for a farm worker against the growers. The only alternative was to go to welfare for medical assistance. If you qualified, great. If you didn't, tough luck. So we tried to get it in the 1968 legislative session coverage, but we had no friends in the legislature at that time. But we found out that there was a way to challenge the administrative decision of the department, so we got the proper challenge, and we held some 13 hearings throughout the state of Washington, every one of them well attended. The first one was in Yakima and it was quite a hearing. I had with me about 250 workers, all who had been injured - broken backs or broken arms or hernias... and they had all signed an affidavit where they had worked, who had they worked for when they got injured - that kind of stuff. We got to this building - it used to be known to be the Pacific Power and Light over in Yakima, and I remember that it was so packed that the fire department fire chief comes over to me and says, "Tomás, I want to have some of your people get out of here because it's over capacity."

I said, "Well, why don't you tell the growers? We're not going to leave." So he ended up doing nothing to anybody. But the growers - when the Labor and Industry hearings started - I remember they asked who's going to testify. And the Mexican workers that were there got afraid because their employers were there. So the only people that lifted their hands were growers. No workers lifted a hand. And I thought, "Uh-oh, we're in trouble now." We're in the first hearing and nobody's hearing the workers. First, they started saying, "Why should we cover farm workers? Actually, we're doing them a favor by giving them a job. They come [here] from Texas, they bring their families that are in summer school, and they are camping out in tents under trees and enjoying themselves. You want us to provide medical care for them when they are on vacation?" And then another one - one guy went out of the way and said, "Well, why should we cover them? Workers are nothing but a bunch of drunks! Are you saying that we should pay them when they get on the ladder and fall down because they are drunk and they get hurt and we're going to be paying for their medical care?"

And boy, that's when Mexican people started getting pretty pissed off and said, "I wanted to testify." And started asking me, "Tomás, I want you to interpret" (because I had another interpreter). "I want you to be the one to interpret." And he started saying, "Listen. I got hurt on *your* farm [pointing to his employer] and I have worked for so many years for you."

And another one said, "Wait, I'm not a drunk."

"Nonsense!" [Growers said] We're not talking about Mexicans. Mexicans are nice people. We are talking about those Anglo tramps." They didn't realize I had about a hundred of them Anglo workers in there, and boy, they started raising Cain. "Oh no, no."

So, finally, another guy comes out of the growers and says, "Well, maybe some of the farms should be covered, but not operations like mine. I have never had an injury on my farm."

I knew it was a lie. He was a neighbor of mine at that time, and I said, "Mr. Clayton, you never had any accident on your farm?"

And he looked at me and said, "Well, I had a couple of minor injuries last year."

I said, "Would you mind explaining to everybody what those two minor accidents mean?"

"Well, one guy lost an eye, and another one got burned with a gallon of gasoline."

That was pretty much the whole conversation. I have to say we won, but it was a really minor victory, because it covered only basically full-time workers. Their position was that workers would be covered after they worked 150 hours with one particular employer, and no employer had them for 150 hours.

It was not until 1981 through a lawsuit that we managed to get all workers covered, and we still have a lot of problems with Labor and Industry. They still are trying to not pay what they are supposed to pay, so the problem with Labor and Industry continues. Lupe, Jeff Jones, and myself, Joe Morris from Columbia Legal Services - we're still fighting Labor and Industry and meeting with them on almost a monthly basis, so that's a big problem-agency. But at least legally, at least supposedly, farm workers are covered by workmen's compensation from the day they get started.

In those times also there was big labor unrest. There were a lot of strikes in the hop fields and everything was run around the United Farm Workers Co-op and Service Center, because we had the boycott. We were supporting the grape boycott. There was no weekend that we didn't have hundreds of advocates supporting the Cesar Chavez boycott, so we surrounded the Safeway stores throughout the Yakima Valley.

And talking about the boycott - that time was 1968, and I had decided to run for the school board. The Toppenish Chamber of Commerce invited all the candidates for the school board to talk. Well, every candidate was asked questions about, "What are you going to do for the schools? What do you propose? What are you going to change?" and that kind of stuff. With me, the only questions that were asked were, "If you get elected, are you still going to continue to picket Safeway?"

I said, "Yeah." And the day before the election - even the day of the election - the local radio station, every five minutes, announced, "Tomás Villanueva says he's gonna continue to boycott Safeway if he gets elected," - these kind of messages. And then I lost the election. I think I got about 60 votes altogether.

Anyway then in the strikes - it also happened between '69, '70, and '71. Before I get into the strikes of the hop harvests back in the late 60s. At those times we were right in the

center of the civil rights movement. There were a lot of things happening, there were a lot of advocates. Back then we managed to get the governor of the state of Washington, Daniel J. Evans, to appoint the first Mexican-American Commission, actually Committee, which later became the Mexican-American Commission and now is the Commission on Hispanic Affairs. It was also very controversial and I thought it was a very good commission when it started, and it was later changed. That's when the Commission all got started, and there was a lot of action in those times.

But going back to the strikes, I remember when the first strike took place, I was on my way to Oregon to visit my brother, whom I hadn't seen for a while and taking my family - we were going to take a couple of days off. I hadn't done it for a long time. But I happened to have left the phone number of where I was going and as soon as I arrived and I got out of the car, my sister-in-law said, "Hey Tomás, there's a phone call for you."

I went and they told me, "We just went on strike and these people want you to be here to be with them."

I said, "OK, I'll be back as soon as I can." I had a 2-1/2, 3-hr drive, so I told my wife, "Don't even get out of the car, and don't let the children get out," I said. "We're going back." So we came back to the strike and pretty soon there's more strikes going on and people started saying they needed an association, so we got the United Farm Workers Association of Washington State - same name that's in California, and I was elected president of that one also. But that association didn't live long, because people decided that they wanted to associate with what by that time was the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee out of California. The union name changed until it became the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO.

I stayed a little bit as an organizer, but I didn't stay long. Lupe Gamboa and Roberto Trevino and Carlos Trevino became the official organizers. I didn't want to become an official organizer, primarily because what I wanted to do was run the farm workers union locally and I knew that California was going through a lot of trouble with the agricultural industry and Brother Cesar - I knew his thinking was that he needed to do something in California before he would move to other states and I knew he would like to call if there is an organizer in Washington, He says, "I need in you in California," or "I need you in New York. You have to move out," and I didn't want to do that. And that's how Lupe Gamboa ended up in Pennsylvania, in Boston, in Canada, for several years. I chose not to. I still kept strongly supporting, working with them, and helping organize them, but not to be an official organizer of the UFW, because I wanted to stay. Whatever I was going to do I wanted to do here in the State of Washington. Then in '74 I left. My dad (who is now deceased) - his health wasn't doing too well.

My dad had a dream. He loved construction, but since he came to the State of Washington, he hardly ever worked in construction. They put him to do a little job here and there, but no contractor would hire him because he couldn't speak English. He couldn't even write his own name. So it's not only speaking - he couldn't even read or write Spanish. He was a terrific carpenter. He is the one who built my original house. I

formed my construction company with all my brothers and him, and I'm glad I did. I lost a bundle, because I was no business manager at the time. I had been working so much in helping people that I tried to do the same thing with the Construction Company, and, boy, did it cost me. But my dad kind of rejuvenated himself at least a good 10-15 years and he's the one that taught everybody. Everybody stayed in construction except me. I'm the only one that got out of it.

With those strikes done, the union continued, most generally under the direction of Lupe, Roberto and Carlos, but finally the effort died down. A lot of that had to do with two things: one is that there were a lot of Mexican foremen that did not like the union and they gave the growers good advice on how to stop the union movement. They convinced growers that the best way to get rid of the union (1) was to raise the wages in general and (2) to treat the workers right, and they said that workers loved to have carnitas (barbecues outside) and beer, so it got customary for a little while that they would drink beer and eat carnitas on payday. People started thinking, "We don't need a union. Why should we join a union while the farmers are becoming our friends? They're treating us right. They're even providing us free beer and free carnitas." So they started losing interest, and at the same time Lupe was called and the other ones were called to different areas to help with the boycott, so the movement kind of died.

At that time, I left construction and went to become a building inspector for a rehab program with low-income housing.³ I would prepare the bids, and then after the bids were given out, I would supervise and make sure the contractor was actually doing the job that he was supposed to do. Well then the local farm workers started a lot of talk through Centro Campesino, which was a social service center out of KDNA.⁴ They were still talking about organizing a farm workers union, and they asked me if I would get involved in it, saying that people trusted me and that I had a lot of experience working with workers and that kind of thing, so I started getting involved.

When Brother Cesar came, I believe it was April, there was going to be a farm workers march from Granger to Yakima, and Brother Cesar was going to be leading the march. So I helped organize it, and walked the march with him. Then they really started talking seriously about what we need is a union, and I knew that we needed a union, but I was kind of convinced to run for president. They said, "Well, you know, you are the one that can make it go and all that." So I talked to my wife and my sons at that time. My sons were little. Between my wife and I there was some fear that I asked them. But they all agreed, "Well, that's what you have always wanted to be. You wouldn't be happy if you didn't get back into it, so go for it."

So I quit my job as a building inspector and ended up being the president of the UFW. It was a lot of hardship - not just on the family. We had a few threats. I remember the very

³ According to further clarification from Tomás Villanueva in a subsequent conversation, this was a grant-based program to help homeowners bring their house up to code and to beautify the community.

⁴ KDNA, referred to, as "cadena" is a local progressive Spanish-language radio station co-founded by Ricardo Garcia.

first day after the September 21, 1986 that we had the convention that officially formed the union. By the next Monday there was an article in the paper saying that I had been elected to this “fledgling union”. They called it a “fledgling” union after two years, because no one had been successful organizing a farm workers union. So, to them, there had been groups in the past, but they would be here today and gone tomorrow. So that’s what the Yakima Herald-Republic as well as the Tri-Cities would call a “fledgling” union. I remember that the following Monday after the convention I was at the office and the paper had come out and had my picture in it and I got this call about 11:30 in the morning and asking me in a pretty rough way, “Are you Tomás Villanueva?”

I said, “Yeah.”

“I understand you formed a union.”

“Yeah.”

“I want to know where you’re located because I want to come and beat the heck out of you.”

I said, “OK.”

“He said, I was with the special forces of the Green Berets in Vietnam, and I want to come and beat the heck out of you.”

“Well, I tell you what. Where do you live?”

“Sunnyside.”

“Oh, Sunnyside is only 15 minutes away from Granger. This is the exact location,” and I told him. I said, “I have a meeting at one o’clock in Yakima. It’s 11:30. I’m willing to be late to my meeting, and I’ll wait for you till 12:45. That gives you a little over an hour.” He never showed up. I think he was just trying to intimidate me. It started on February 10th of 1987[at Pyramid Orchards]. We tried to discourage them and all the growers said I was trying to do strikes. Actually, I tried to prevent every one of them, but people were so frustrated.

That’s another thing that happens in terms of information about the union. It started really strong and people had been frustrated - they’d been abused and everything. Then, suddenly, it comes out that a farm workers union has been formed in the state of Washington for one thing. Secondly, it is 1986, when you have the amnesty and a lot of people under the amnesty program got their green card so a lot of people started saying, “Hey, I got the green card. I don’t have to hide anymore, and I don’t have to work for the wages that I’m getting paid now and I’m not going to work for less than \$5 an hour. So people started saying hey, we are now legal residents and we have a Union, this prompted people to over estimate the union. We had no resources whatsoever. In just the first two years we had over 25 strikes. One time I couldn’t even

come home because there was a strike on a hop farm that was operating three shifts and I had two other persons Bill Nicacio and Manuel Cortez that were helping me and I had two other strikes going on, so I sent one to each strike and I stayed there day and night for almost a week, not even coming home, so it was tough.

But this Pyramid Orchards, which was the first strike which began on February 10, 1987, one, that had such great support from the community that inspired workers in other areas that strikes during the summer of 1987 spread like a wild fire. In this strike there were only 60 workers involved as strikers, but people on the picket lines on weekdays were at least a hundred and at least 300 to 400 on weekends. By five o'clock in the morning, people would be coming down on their way to work, dropping us taquitos, coffee, and food. I think the time I spent on that strike was the time that I was fed the best.

I remember that actually that's when they started the opposition - the Washington Growers' League, which is now called the Growers' League. They formed for the whole purpose of trying to stop us - trying to stop the farm worker union, and the growers started it during the Pyramid strike. I remember the growers brought many consultants from California - strike breakers - to help them on how to stop the strike. Then one day in March of 1987 we started hearing rumors that growers were meeting at the Valley Mall parking lot to figure out how to stop the strike before it will spread, also we started getting calls from workers and workers stopping by and telling us, "Hey, on April such-[and-such-] a-time (it was a Saturday) growers are saying that there's going to be 300 growers that have committed themselves, and each one is going to bring 3 more workers, which makes it 1200 and they're going to try and finish the pruning in one day, and they will break the strike completely." At first we thought maybe it was just a rumor, but pretty soon we started hearing it even from people in Walla Walla, telling us the same thing, "What should we do about it?"

I said, "If your boss tells you to come, don't come. They cannot fire you. They can fire you if you don't work on their farm, but they cannot force you to work for somebody else." Well, I believe it was the Thursday before that so-called Saturday. I had a radio talk show program at Radio KDNA, and I started talking about what was going on, and got a lot of calls from people saying, "Very fine, yeah. My foreman told me I have to be there." And also in the middle of that week, we saw a whole bunch of trucks bringing new ladders, bringing those chemical toilets, I mean by the truckloads, preparing for that Saturday. Now this is really when we started seeing all this.

Then we got on the radio program and we asked people, "We'd appreciate it, for you not to come, and if you come to come to the picket line." The growers were supposed to arrive there at 10:00 A.M., Well, by 8:00, we already had 1,000 people on the picket line and by 10:00, which was when the growers were supposed to come, we had over 2,000 workers in the picket line surrounding the entire orchard, and there were only about 150 growers that showed up and they were real sad. They did manage to get about 50 workers, but all the workers came with a mask - one of those ski masks - they felt so ashamed that they didn't want to be recognized.

People just started talking to the growers, and each of them was fearless. I had never seen people who had completely lost the fear of the employer. Because they were saying, "Hey John, I've been working for you, I've been doing this, and you think it's fair what you're paying?" They would run him down really bad, and each worker was looking for their employers around the farm. It only lasted an hour and a half. They all left. So it was a good strike.

As I mentioned earlier as president of the UFW of Washington State I participated in many strikes, some lasted a few days others a week or two with the exception of Pyramid which went on for some seven months, and to the misconception of agricultural employers none of the strikes was called by the Union. Workers will first go out on strike and then call us for our support, often I tried to discourage them from striking, but they were tired of the low wages and the working conditions and treatment they were receiving. In fact most of the strikes were the result of actual deduction in wages and the manner in which the foremen's mistreated the workers, it was very unfortunate that the grower/employer always took the side of their foreman and refused to listen to the concerns of their workers. I should mention that every strike was memorable and had great support from the farm workers community. In Pyramid Orchards I remember that people will bring us coffee and taquitos by 5:00 A.M, and do the same through-out the day.

I talked about foremen mistreating workers I should also say that this is not a general statement for one of the foremen put his job on the line and was fired after working for Pyramid Orchards for some ten years, also it was a foreman from the Cowiche area who collected donations from other foremen to rent chemical toilets for the strikers. I remember the strike against a local Toppenish grower, we did every effort to reach an amicable solution, but the Farm Bureau intervened pressuring the grower to refuse to listen to the demands of the workers—the main one being to replace the foreman. The grower ended up losing some 130 acres of asparagus harvest.

The strike against an asparagus grower near Mabton, I will have to say it was a mistake for the UFW involvement. It was prompted by some young men whom assured us that every worker was on strike. These young men wanted do "stop work" using violence and that is one thing I could never accept so I withdrew our support and the strike ended.

The strike on Golden Gate Farms was not like every other one because they all had something unique and different, on this one the people who went on strike were the truck drivers. They were asking for a twenty-five cent raise per hour, but the majority of the workers went on strike to support them, sadly the truck drivers whom at the time were all men, made a deal with the employer and went back to work without concern for the rest of the workers. I should mention that without drivers there is no harvest, in this case it was the women who continued the strike. I remember one young lady by the name of Lupe. I remember her because she was one of the bravest and more active in the strike, even going against her own father who was breaking the strike. The ending of

this strike was sad. After a week of twenty-four hour pickets, the employer threatened to evict them from the labor camp and we had no attorneys. That's probably the first time I actually cried with the workers whom refused to return to work.

I probably could write hundreds of pages if I was to write about every strike in which I participated, but the last one in September of 1992, in which I participated as president of the UFW of Washington State was the shortest and most successful. I was at the office in Granger when a worker called and says we went on strike against Green Acres Orchards in Mattawa, can you come and help us? Manuel Cortez whom at the time was in the office and I loaded some Union flags and drove to Mattawa, as we arrived at the place there were well over a hundred workers gathered together playing guitar and singing. To Manuel's and my surprise we saw that there was an ambulance, a fire truck, four sheriff vehicles and three state trooper vehicles.

I had just briefly spoken with some of the workers so I went and talked to the sheriff and asked what they were doing there. The Sheriff responded that the employer reported that the workers were rioting and the rioting was even reported in a local radio station. I just laughed and asked, "Does this looks like a riot? These men and women have gone on strike because as the harvest is winding down and workers are being fired and are loosing their bonus⁵." The Sheriff was very courteous and said, "Everybody has the right to demand his or her wages, and we only came because we were told that this was a riot."

I tried to talk to the employer and he refused to talk to me and the workers so I climbed to the back of a truck and told workers that the UFW will support them, and I talked about the arrogance of the employer who has refused to even talk to them about their demands. I told them that it was going to be a tough strike and that they needed to be on the picket line from early morning to late in the evening. They responded that they were ready because they were not about to lose their money already earned. As I started to give instructions on how to conduct a picket line and cover all entrances, the employer, who was listening and I did not know that he could understand and speak perfectly the Spanish language, approached me and asked me if I could let the workers hear him. I ask the workers and they yell in unison "NO!" The employer was pleading to talk to the workers so I told them "Listen, lo Cortez no quita lo valiente.⁶ Let's listen to him," and they all agreed. What a beautiful site. Here is an employer telling the workers "I need you very much, I will pay you one more dollar per bin and give me three days to do the paper work and I will pay you all the withheld bonus, but please don't leave me now." Hearing the employers plead for help the striking workers got a little cocky. One asked about the people that were already fired, what about their bonus? The employer responded that he will pay the bonus to them. Then another said, "Your foreman Bill⁷ has treated us like dirt and has insulted two of our women, if you want us to finish the

⁵ The employer was paying I believe \$12.00 per 800 pound bin of golden delicious apples and was withholding \$3.00 per bin, and according to the strikers 25 of them had already been fired and not paid their bonus

⁶ To be courteous does not means that you are a coward

⁷ An Anglo Forman whom according to the workers was treating them very bad and had insulted two Mexican women workers

harvest we want him to apologize to us and especially to these two women.” The employer called Bill and asked him to apologize. At first Bill refused, but then the employer very explicitly told him, “Listen Bill, right now I need them more than I need you, so Bill apologize and promise to be fair from there on.”

Every strike was tough, but I believe that in every strike we gained something. Above all, workers gain some respect from their employers. Unfortunately employers still have not learned to listen to their workers concerns and still depend much on what their foremen tells them and fear that if workers unionize they will lose control, rather than seeing it as a benefit to both employers and employees alike.

What was difficult and took time was to get the support of both organized labor (State AFL-CIO) and some democrats, especially in the State Senate. I remember that in the first farm workers convention of September 21, of 1986 farm workers decided to form a Union. The concerns of those present were to be protected by the same laws that other workers were covered under, like minimum wage, unemployment benefits, labor standards, child labor and collective bargaining.

Larry Kenney, the President of the State Labor Council at the time, was very supportive of our cause, however because we were not affiliated with the AFL-CIO he was very reluctant to openly support the UFW of Washington State. His loyalty was to the AFL-CIO membership. Although I had much support from labor people, I was often treated as an outcast by the leadership. In our country, the USA, there is the philosophy that “if you can’t beat them joins them.” My philosophy which up till now has worked is that “if you can’t beat them wear them down.” And what I mean is that I never took “NO” for an answer, I just kept coming back. Eventually Larry Kenney became one the first and strongest labor leaders in the state supporting farm workers rights and spending endless days and nights working with us and helping in finally getting farm workers coverage under several labor laws from which farm workers had been exempt for many years.

The February 1987 strike at Pyramid Orchards set us back in our legislative agenda, however we were able to spend time in Olympia during the 1988 legislative session, unfortunately, without much success—except for minimum wage laws, which although it failed in the legislation the livable income coalition (labor, ecumenical and community groups) introduced initiative I-518, which included farm worker under the state minimum wage and at the same time raising the minimum wage for the first time in more than 14 years. The initiative was successfully approved by the voters in the November 1988 general election. However we were a little better prepared for the 1989 legislative session. By then we had form alliances with the State Labor Council, the Washington Association of Churches and the Seattle based lobbying arm of the Catholic Church; plus we had made good friends with legislative leaders like Max Veckich and with Margarita Prentice, then both on the House of Representatives. With the help of Representative Prentice several legislative bills were proposed in the House of Representatives such as coverage of farm workers under the State Unemployment Benefits, Labor standards, Child Labor and a small Pesticide bills protecting farm

workers from dangerous pesticides. With Joe King as Speaker of the House and Max Veckich as Chair of the House Labor and Commerce Committee those bills sailed through the House of Representatives. The majority were Democrats, however in the Senate which was controlled by Republicans it became a different story. Republican Senator who Chair of the Senate Labor & Commerce Committee set an evening date at 7:00 pm for the farm workers bills to be heard. She was aware that the Democratic Senate had a special fundraiser on that particular day at that particular time and wanted to embarrass the democrats, which she did, because at the hearing there was not a single democrat present. What neither the Democrats nor Republicans were aware of was that we had scheduled a three day hunger strike at the Capitol Rotunda if our bills were not considered at that particular hearing, but we didn't know about their event, and they didn't know about ours. Although they think that we did it on purpose, we went to this hearing in Olympia. There were some 50 workers who went to testify, and we were forced to have a hearing on the Senate side. So we ended up facing a bunch of Republicans that didn't want us in the first place. But we had planned that we were going to stay there for three days. And if they didn't listen to us in the hearing, then we were going to do a hunger strike for three days. We moved into the dome inside the capitol. They wanted to throw us out. I said, "You can't just throw us out. You have to arrest us in order to get us out of here."

They said, "Well, but we have to lock the doors."

"You can lock them," I said, "we don't need it open. We got the restrooms here. We got water, you know, and it's nice and warm inside." The Democrats' event happened to be the biggest fundraising event of the year for the Democrats, and they have a big annual crab dinner, so the headline in the following day's morning paper was, "While the Democrats feast on crab, workers fast." And then it talked about how neither rain, nor thunder or anything is going to stop Senate Democrats from a fundraiser. It doesn't matter what farm workers are supposed to represent. It really made a splash. The Democrats came over early. They didn't want me to speak to the media, so they invited me to speak to the entire caucus - all 24 senators. [They said,] "Tomás, we are with you, we are with farm workers, but you have to understand that we are in the minority. Just about everyone was coming with the same kind of a message. They kept saying, "We want you to tell us what you want us to do, but remember we are in the minority."

Even so, I told them, "Your problem is not that you are in the minority. You know, I've been in the minority all my life, but I never gave up on anything. Your problem - you've only been a minority for a couple of years, but you already developed not a minority complex, but an inferiority complex." Boy that changed things.

"Well, what can we do?"

"Well, at least put up a fight. Just because you are in the minority you are not even worried that you are not getting anything out of this loss? That's what I want you to do - do your best. If you failed it, fine, but don't give me that you're not doing anything because you're in the minority." So some of them joined us on the last two nights, both

from the House as well as from the Senate. They joined us on the hunger strike. Their attitude completely changed. We started getting strong support. Still, the legislature failed us that year. We were pushing for the minimum wage, also, but there was a committee they call the Livable Income Coalition and they were fighting to try to raise the minimum wage. We formed a part of it, and Lupe Gamboa was involved at that time with me. We formed part of the coalition and part was to include farm workers in the minimum wage, and we managed to convince them that rather than have the minimum wage raised, that farm workers [would] be part of the minimum wage - to have coverage, because if they just raised the minimum wage, farm workers would still be left out.

Well, they went along with us, so the legislation died, but the same coalition ran an initiative campaign, and we managed to do both things - include farm workers for the first time in the same minimum wage and increase the minimum wage. Now it's everybody's fight. If they try to lower the minimum wage, it's everybody's fight, not just farm workers. So that was a good thing. Then, in the 1989 legislation, we talked about child labor and labor standards, and unemployment insurance, which probably was very key. Particularly child labor was very important. Our children were called dumb and always dropping out of school. Our children were being taken to the fields to cut asparagus at 4, 4:30 in the morning, leaving from home at 9 or 10 to school. I mean, they didn't want to study - they wanted to fall asleep on the desk. So that was very important. Fortunately, in the House, we had the majority - supportive Democrats, and [with the aid of the] chairman of the Labor and Commerce Committee, Max Veckich, you know, we passed everything, including a kind of a mickey-mouse pesticide bill, and I say mickey-mouse because really it didn't do very much. They all passed the House, but they all died in the Senate, except for the pesticide bill.

The pesticide bill survived because an uncontrollable event had happened - the Ralph Nader group came out with a study about "alar", the pesticide that used to be used on the apples. It was a national study supposedly that alar caused cancer in children and it became a panic nationwide. Anyway, at the time we were fighting for the legislation, alar was the main pesticide used on apples. So apple sales went down. Schools were canceling contracts that would buy apples, and that kind of situation. The Senate made some changes in the pesticide bill, for the worse, but it was a really good thing that they did. For us it was a brilliant thing. Because now it no longer was the same as the House version, so now it had to go back to the House for confirmation. Well, in the House, there is a way - a tricky thing that you can put bills through another bill if they are related somehow. Well, ours were all agriculture-related, so Max Veckich attached the child labor, the unemployment, and labor standards bills to the pesticide bill. Now for the Senate to kill ours they would have to kill their bill, and they wanted the pesticide bill very badly because they wanted to tell the public that, "Hey yeah, the growers are concerned about our pesticides," and they wanted to use it as a public relations tool.

So other Senate member growers, such as Senator Scott Bar, very conservative, said, "Tomás, how about if we exchange one bill for one bill? Tell them that we get the pesticide bill and you can choose any one that you want."

“No,” I said, “We want them all.”

“Don’t you think that you guys want too much too soon?”

“What do you mean too much too soon?” I said, “All these laws protecting workers were enacted over thirty years ago, thirty years back, except for farm workers. So you think thirty years later is too soon and that we are asking for too much?”

He said, “Are you willing to risk all of that for farm workers for being stubborn about this law?”

I said, “We’re not risking anything.”

“What do you mean you’re not risking anything?”

“How can we risk what we don’t have? We don’t have coverage at all right now, so we’re not risking anything.” So needless to say, they passed all of them. They ended up calling it Super House Bill 2222. We have to depend on limited windows of opportunity and take advantage of them, and that’s pretty much what we have done.

Our struggle with Chateau Saint Michelle was also a big one. I remember Alan Shoup saying once to me that there was no way that Chateau Saint Michelle would ever recognize a union, especially the farm workers union. It took us eight years. The workers were determined. Chateau Saint Michelle especially had a kind of arrogance especially Alan Shoup. When I first organized the first picket line in Woodinville, I remember he came by in a big huge white car. I didn’t know him. He asked me if I would get in and go and have a cup of coffee with him. I said, “Sure, why not?” as he turned out to be some official from the inside. We went for a cup of coffee, and he started telling me, “I’ve always heard you to be a very reasonable person, Tomás.”

I said, “Well, I don’t know you.”

“Well,” he said, “I have heard from Greg Delare and other people that know you (I know those guys) and they always told me that you’re very reasonable, but you’re now being unreasonable.”

I said, “What’s unreasonable about workers wanting to have a union and be represented as such?”

He said, “Oh Tomás, you have to understand. We are trying to develop a new industry - the wine industry in the state of Washington. We wanted to be able to develop the best wine in the country and in the world, and we are trying to implement the methods used in France and Japan.”

I said, “And what are those methods?”

“In order to create a good quality wine grape, workers have to be very loyal, and they have to fall in love with the vines.”

Well, you know, I just laughed, and I said, “Listen, you know, my understanding has always been that for a good quality wine it depends on (1) the type of soil where you grow your vines, (2) the skills of your wine maker, and (3) the aging process of the wine. This is the first time I’ve ever heard that for a good quality wine workers have to have a love affair with the grape vines”.

He got pissed off, but that was his thinking. So it was a good, tough fight and I was not with the union officially when we got the contract, but I was part of it and I helped to the very end. So I feel proud that I was part of it.

I think the union now has taken a different approach, which I think is good. See, in my time as president, there was pretty much a confrontational kind of thing, which was good in those times. We didn’t have the type of backing - we didn’t affiliate until after I left the union. And now when we’re talking about the fair apple trade campaign, now I’m talking on a collaboration-type relationship level rather than a confrontational one, and it’s primarily because the growers are having financial difficulty. There are some growers that are willing to listen that in the time I was president wouldn’t have listened, because they were doing pretty well, so why should they collaborate? So I think that it can be very positive doing this kind of collaborating - positive for farm workers as well as the agricultural industry.

Well, I believe in terms of the union that, talking about overall industry, there is a lot of fear among small growers, but I was in a meeting a week ago last Sunday. It was at church - Wesley Methodist Church. They have a weekly program there dealing with agricultural issues, and they had one week where they had growers speak. Then I went to speak in terms of workers.

They asked me several things after I spoke. One was how I felt about the growers and being the current economic situation that they were losing their farms, and I said, “Well, number one, you have to understand that you’re not losing your farms so much because of the economy. You are losing your farms because of what corporations are doing to the small farm, which is what the Wal-Mart’s are doing to mom and pop grocery stores,” and they all agreed.

The other thing is, I feel sympathy for the agricultural growers, but my sympathies do not go so far as to say that farm workers should continue to subsidize the survival of the agricultural industry by cutting their wages and cutting benefits. My sympathy cannot go that far.

I think it is to the advantage of small growers whom generally are more reasonable in the way they treat of workers, because they have a closer relation. But they also are very fearsome, even though there are some that might be very sympathetic and want to

help but they fear to come forward publicly. They fear the big corporations, many which are owned by the shipping and packing companies. I have talked to growers who have said, "I wish we could do it, but the whole story is the big companies - they lend money to the small growers ahead of time to do all the work and everything, so in essence, they are forced to provide the product to those companies, so their hands are pretty tied.

They set the prices. I always say that this is the case for these large companies, especially with the ones that control cold storage. When the price is good, they send their apples out. When the price is bad, they send the ones from the growers that are paying them to keep them there.

My current job as as a community relations coordinator for the Department of Social and Health Services, working in Eastern Washington, has a lot to do with the type of work which I have done all my life, a lot of my work is in availability of services. I work as an advocate; wherever there is a need for advocacy within the community - anything that potentially affects health of people, mostly farm workers.

I get involved a lot in farm worker housing issues. I've been involved with the housing issue since I was with the union, and after that, and my supervisors understand. If people live in a deteriorated and unhealthy house, it's going to eventually affect medical services involving health and local food banks - people that don't qualify for food stamps. To me, that's my job to insure that people don't fall through the cracks. So it's a lot of things that I used to do through the union. I don't call that organizing, except sometimes I take time off to do lobbying for the union. I still help the union, but I try to take my time off, as a vacation time or something. I have not often got into trouble with my supervisors, but there has been a lot of pressure from the Farm Bureau, for example. At one time, the Speaker of the House even threatened to withdraw my salary from the budget. So far I have survived, but I don't intend to change what I do. I intend to continue to support farm workers, and continue to support farm worker issues. If that ever affects my job, well, then it affects me, but it's not going to change me. They say you can't teach old dog new tricks. You cannot change my beliefs.

Part of the reason why I left the union, which was a tough decision for me to make, as I mentioned, [was that] we had no funding, no resources. It was very difficult and we had no medical care - no medical insurance. So I had a lot of collection agencies after me. My wife often ended up having to get food from food banks, because not only was I not home most of the time, but not bringing home enough of the bacon. That's why in 1992; I had to make a decision that I needed to get a job to help me support the family. It was very difficult. For example, what really hurt me was that the last winter that I worked with the union, my kids would go through the snow to the bus stop with tennis shoes all worn down so you could see that they got very wet.

I had some help. I have a nephew - by that time he had lived with me for a while and became an attorney, and he helped by sending money to my wife to buy the kids shoes,

clothing, he loved my two kids who were in school at that time - to buy them shoes and things they needed. But it was just becoming very, very difficult.

One time I almost lost my house if it wasn't for many farm workers and Jeff Johnson and many brothers and sisters from the labor movement. They each gave me \$25-50 (because I needed \$10,000 or I'd lose my house, and they came up with the money altogether) so I could save it. So it was a difficult situation. But even after that, in 1992, when I started working for the Insurance Commissioner and right after I started working for them, it came legislative time in Olympia, 1993, and they were talking about the Labor Relations Act for farm workers, so I told Deborah Senn, the Insurance Commissioner, that I needed 3 months off to work on lobbying for farm workers and they granted me the leave. So I worked with legislation that year without salary, but at least I already had started working with them. And all they told me was just make sure you put at least one day a month of work per month so we can continue to cover you for health insurance. And to me that was a big thing, in terms of the family, so that's what I did, but I did have to get a stable job.

As for the house, I wanted to change it, and I love to have flowers, and you see it now. I'm just getting started, but I think I will have one of the nicest gardens. It's going to be a lot nicer when I finish with it. I still have to do a lot of cleaning up, and I have always loved gardens, but as you can see in the picture, I have nothing but weeds.

I never had time to use a hoe to clean up anything. Now I try to dedicate my weekends or evenings and I almost completely finished with the house. Once it is completed, I am hoping to really work the outside and continue to do the landscaping. It is great, and I did the design. A lot of it was based on my trips to Arizona and to California. I looked at those Hispanic style houses, took pictures, and came out with an idea on how I could put together the old garage that I had in the back with the old house I had in the front, and put it together so it looked like it was an original plan that was designed like that, and got an old person, Don Francisco, who had done a lot of the Mexican-style houses in California before and who now lives in Toppenish, and he helped me put together the outside design. All the inside **design** I did myself, but it has been my son Jaime that has helped me the most - all this tile we have done ourselves - and my brother-in-law, Dan as well as my brother, Alfonso. Everybody has contributed, so I hardly had to pay any labor, except maybe for the electrical and a few little things. Even the cabinets - I built them myself. So... I'm really proud that I finally got to have my house the way it is and have something better to offer my family - a good shelter for them to live under.

Where do we go from here? The union is going slow and it's kind of a difficult situation. Changing a lot. The growers, some of them are in big trouble, but I think mostly because of the big corporations, the greed. They used to blame it on the government that they were paying minimum wage, because of the regulations, but the fact is that the big corporations are taking over. And big corporations are moving out. Take Del Monte corporation, it's now in Peru processing asparagus and bringing it back to sell to the USA consumer. Seneca is following the same path. It's just greed—how to make a buck. How they can pay low wages to workers, and then there are no import taxes. It's

not just the other industries now. The big corporations are buying out small growers. I'm not sure what's going to happen. The growers complain, especially the asparagus industry about the high cost of labor. One of their things is they've been trying to do is screw farm workers from their minimum wage. Farm workers, I mean, they have the same necessities of other workers they pay the same price for goods (food, rent utilities, gas etc) as other people. You can not sacrifice one group in support of another. Farm workers have always been the sacrificial lamb in terms of the agricultural industry and state and federal legislatures. Right now, for example, the state has 3.3 million dollars to help the asparagus industry, including the development of a machine to mechanize the harvest of asparagus. Well, this is fine, but how about farm workers? They work in this place. So everybody's concerned about something, but farm workers have not been part of those concerns.

One of the things there needs to be is political power. That's going to have to start with two things: voter registration but the other one is a lot of education and trying to get people out to vote. Historically, Hispanics are very low in turning out to vote. I don't blame them. No candidate has anything to offer them. Once in a while we have had a candidate that makes a lot of promises and when they get to office they completely forget. So people are very disillusioned. We're trying to get candidates that talk about the real issues. The candidates in this area don't talk about issues of concern to farm workers and the Hispanic and minority communities. They talk about the Black Rock Reservoir, about the water, about the agricultural industry, but nothing about issues related to the farm worker community. I'm very fortunate from the position that I have. I do a lot of the advocacy that I've always done, even with the agricultural industry on behalf of the workers. Not too long ago there was a federal mandate for a state agency to do voter registration. I talked to my office and they were not even aware of it in Olympia. I'm going to be the person making sure that farm workers are receiving health services, and really gets involved with voter registration in Eastern Washington. Because my whole area is the whole Eastern Washington. I already had the first meeting. I'm having meetings with every office and showing them what to do and what needs to be done. Hopefully, maybe we will double the participation within the next year or two. I think that's the only way we're going to change it. Get more people involved, the Hispanic community keeps growing. I think, I don't see too far in the future, when things are going to change politically. Hopefully, change will be for the better. I think that it will.