

From the Ashes

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¿Qué Pasa, OSU? "Mi Experiencia"

Winter 2008

<http://quepasa.osu.edu/issues/sp08/miexperiencia.htm>



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The year I was born, 1947, might seem long forgotten, irrelevant to today's pressing issues and financial crises. With workers away in the war, women and minorities had been drafted into the workforce. Mexican-Americans, if not serving in the armed forces (as they did in great numbers) helped fill the void in labor-intensive agricultural stoop labor jobs. My family was among the thousands recruited in the post war years by crew leaders and labor contractors for the sugar beet and tomato companies such as Campbell Soup, Libby's, Heinz, Buckeye Sugar, Pioneer, and others from the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas.

In those days, there were no interstate highways, just two-lane roads with a 50 mph speed limit, so it took us four to five days to make the 1600 mile trek to northwest Ohio. Those were the days of segregation where signs proliferated distinguishing between blacks and whites. We avoided drinking fountains, rest rooms and other public facilities, because we didn't want to get in trouble with anyone and delay our trip north. Other signs, indicating "No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed" reminded us of our status and to stay out of sight and out of mind. It seemed that our only purpose was to do the daily back-breaking work and then disappear until the next day. Yes, that stoop labor was not only arduous, but monotonous in its repetitiveness, and it burdened one with a sense of hopelessness since the only thing that you could look forward to was another row of plants, bushes, trees or acres, just like the last one. Worse, no matter how hard you worked and how many rows you harvested, poverty and debt strangled the family's aspirations and battered your will to survive, leaving one facing the abyss of such self-destructive behavior as alcoholism, gambling, drugs or misdirected anger.

When I was 5 years old, we began our journey in the back of a flat-bed truck with wooden sideboards and a canvas over the top. We were crammed with five or six other families huddled together trying to keep warm in the cool nights, as the humming of the truck wheels served as a mesmerizing lullaby. Early morning pit stops were not gas stations, where we weren't allowed to use the bathrooms, but rather wooded areas where men and women would go in different directions to relieve themselves.

Arriving in Ohio, we were introduced to shelters that were often barns or chicken coops, and if we were lucky, a one room shack equipped with a two burner kerosene stove. I remember the excitement of picking the crop the next day, feeling that we could now make some money to buy real food! Having survived on beans and tortillas for the past week, we were ready for serious protein or even some sugar, salt, and chile in our diet. A dose of reality quickly hit our hope for fortunes when the ambitiousness of our crew leaders and company field men always demanded more than we could produce, forcing us to work late into the evening even when our bodies begged for relief.

We were strong and athletic, and as I grew with my brothers, became a desired crew. Being good workers did not shield our family from the verbal abuse and cheating of our wages. Since everything was piece-rate in those days, we picked by the hamper, crate, basket, lug, row or acre. Forget any Federal Minimum Wage, it just wasn't paid. Hourly work was out of the question.

I began my education in the North, although that had not been the plan. We were stranded in Port Clinton, Ohio one fall and didn't make it back to Texas. Not realizing that you had to heat your home in the shockingly cold winter months here, we moved the family into the kitchen of an old abandoned farm house where the only heat source was the oven. Not knowing any English, I started going to school and I made sure to go every day because it was warm in the school house and cold at home. The entire winter, my dad would borrow money from the farmers to feed us, bringing us into spring with months of debt. Most of the summer was spent paying off the winter debt by working it off, leaving us nothing in the fall only to face another winter to accumulate another summer's worth of debt. It seemed as though Poverty would laugh in our face because no matter how hard we worked, it would ride us like an unshakable bronco buster. The worst was not the poverty. It was the treatment by those field men and labor contractors, the verbal tongue lashings, the cursings and sexual innuendos to my mom and sisters that made one brim with anger and "coraje."

My mom was a charismatic Catholic; in later years when we finally got to visit her sisters in South Texas their home worship meetings would make Pentecostals look very tame indeed. Always her prayers and references to God were that somehow matters were still in His control. Not only did I doubt, but I would blame God for being such a lousy God for keeping us in this terrible existence. It took us years to break out of this cycle, and by then we were rooted in Northwest Ohio. I knew enough English by the time I was in the third grade to begin to understand what the teachers were really talking about and became an average student.

It wasn't until my seventh grade year that an encounter occurred that changed my academic career. I became conscious that a boy could gain respect by playing sports, so my grade school years had been spent honing my athletic abilities in everything there was to play. When I hit the seventh grade, I went out for everything and did well. I wasn't the most athletic of all the boys, but I had the hardest work-ethic, thanks to my field work experience, so I did very well. I was playing halfback on the seventh-eighth grade team, both offense and defense, and after scoring some three touchdowns and running around, through, and over everybody for the better part of the game, I was leaving with a sense of satisfaction, when one of my Anglo teammates came up to me as we were walking to the showers and said, "Hey Velasquez, I guess you're a good player, but you're still a dumb Mexican, look at your grades!" I made a vow then that no one would ever call me a dumb Mexican again. That very night, I went home and studied for an important history test until 2:00 AM and continued the same for the next week. Since my vocabulary wasn't very good, I had to secure a dictionary and had to look up a word in every paragraph to really understand what I was reading. Not only did I ace that test, I ended up on the honor roll by the end of the year, and stayed there until I graduated from high school.

In high school, I was blessed to have one of the best math teachers anywhere. She taught me discipline, planning, preparation and creative thought. She was just phenomenal. Dorothy Fish was a bespectacled school-marm, a grandmother type, wearing her hair in a bun, rather frail looking and seemingly easy prey to class cut-ups and tough jocks. Incongruently, she had the most disciplined classroom in the entire school! Her modus operandi was requiring us to recite and present a word problem to the entire class weekly. She would call on you randomly to recite any of the daily assigned problems and you had to have them all prepared. If unprepared for her class, the toughest football player in front of the entire class could be reduced to a humiliating brainless wonder and made to feel embarrassingly naked as she walked you through the problem. Not only did you not want to be embarrassed, but she instilled in us a desire to truly solve the problems that were handed to us, a discipline that still serves me well today.

Another high school teacher confronted me about going to college. In those days, I thought going to college was just for white kids. I thought I would go to work in some factory and help my Mom and Dad pay bills and that was it. This English Literature teacher (George Vance) said that I ought to try to go to college and that my grades were good enough. By that time, being a senior, the only school I could afford to go to was Pan American College in Edinburg, Texas. I went and did well, but a most serious transformation occurred. I witnessed the poverty and the oppression of the Mexican-American peoples in the Rio Grande Valley where I was born. My uncles, aunts and cousins, all living in that area, gave me a shock of reality in the mid-1960's, the heyday of the civil rights movement. Racism was clearly evident in my growing up in Ohio, but it wasn't as blatant and arrogantly overt as in South Texas. That first year of college moved me from my engineering major to the social sciences. My love of math, however inspiring my high school math teacher had been, was overwhelmed by my sense of the injustice of what I

witnessed. The years of pent-up anger gave me the desire to redeem the fatalism of hopelessness that I knew plagued those field workers still trapped by their own fate and historical design.

I transferred back to Ohio, to Ohio Northern University and then to Bluffton College. All the while I was on a seemingly quixotic quest for social justice, and looking for a way to right all the past wrongs, if not for myself then for those that would continue to come.

LOOKING BACK

This last February 15th, I had the honor to be the commencement speaker at Harvard University's graduating class of the Labor Studies Program. Now, as president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), I attempted to describe how it was not a career that I chose but rather a career that chose me.

Over the past 20 years, FLOC has successfully negotiated labor agreements with some of the world's largest agricultural giants, like Campbell's Soup, Heinz USA, Dean's Foods, Vlasic Pickles, Mt. Olive Pickle Company, and the North Carolina Grower's Association, the latter being the first transnational collective-bargaining agreement in labor history, representing some 7000 "guest workers" from Mexico. As the labor movement has by-passed migrant laborers, having forever been excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, and shunned their organization because of the short-term work periods, these accomplishments are no small feat. The hundreds of organizing campaigns, marches, demonstrations were always met with great opposition, threats and violence by those that enriched themselves by imposing misery and poverty on the weakest members of society. The beating of our attorney by the Sheriff of Putnam County in 1978 and the assassination of our staff person in the union's office in Monterrey, Mexico in 2007 are shocking reminders of the brutality of those with seared consciences towards other's humanity. I lost track of how many times I have been arrested (over 30) for picketing and marching defending the rights of the pickers.

Standing before this audience of brilliant students, parents and some of the nation's most renowned professors and intellectuals, I attempted to explain how all of this came to be. There is no question that I felt like the phoenix that had risen from the ashes. I related that the first influence was perhaps my experience with family and friends, trying to survive and looking out for one another. The second influence was somehow getting an education and having significant teachers who provided discipline, sound principles for learning and being creative. Finally, succumbing to my mother's faith and being forever changed by my acquiescence to a God that really did have matters under control.

The first two influences have already been described, but the last can as easily be seen if one bothers to look. Those seemingly hopeless days of picking were learning through pragmatic exercises of persistence, hope and faith. Persistence trained me to have stamina because it took stamina to last through those rows after rows of crops. You didn't have any choice, and you had to stick to it until you finished the last row. You learned how to finish and not leave anything half done. While it seemed hopeless in life, you knew if you filled enough buckets, hampers, boxes, or crates, your hope for food the next day would be fulfilled. Faith is described in scripture as the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." You thought that there would never be an end of rows to pick or that the day or week would never end. But the end would come, the end of the row, the day, and the week, even the season. The evidence to ending seemed elusive on those hot, humid and dusty days yet I know now that they did come, just as I know that the struggles we take up for justice for those who are still laboring in the fields will continue to bear fruit. It will bear fruit because it is a right and good cause and it will be a harvest of justice and righteousness.