

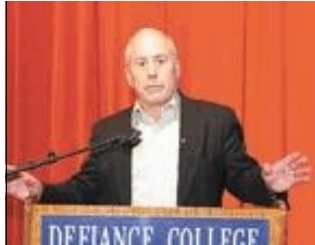
## Velasquez Shares His Quest

McMaster Symposium, Defiance College

Jack Palmer, Crescent News

April 10 2008

<http://www.crescent-news.com/news/article/3611811>



Sharing his love for America and quoting the Bible, migrant worker rights leader Baldemar Velasquez told a local audience Wednesday that the immigration issue cannot be reduced to a few sound bites.

Velasquez, who founded the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) as a Bluffton College student in 1967, spoke from the heart rather than notes during his remarks as keynote speaker for the opening night of the fourth annual McMaster Symposium at Defiance College.

He prefaced his comments about immigration policy with his powerful personal story of growing up in Putnam County after his parents were recruited to come north from Texas as migrant workers.

"The terms racism, prejudice and discrimination were not in people's vocabularies in the 1950s," said Velasquez, recalling the journey to Ohio. "Those things existed, there just weren't words for them.

"Whenever we wanted to use bathrooms and drink water at gas stations, we saw signs saying, 'No Mexicans or dogs allowed.' "

After arriving in Ohio, his family lived in barns and chicken coops.

"We got up and went to work," he said. "It took courage and stamina to work in the fields. It's repetitious, it's repressive, it's tough. You feel like there is no hope in life besides the next crop row, the next field.

"We didn't realize you had to heat your homes up here. That first winter we moved into the kitchen of an abandoned farm house where the only heat source was the oven."

Fortunately, the schools were warm.

"We didn't have the money to go back in the winter, so we stayed and I went to school. The teachers put us in the corners and didn't bother with us. They didn't have special classes back then. They just thought after a few months we would go back to Texas.

"My dad borrowed money from farmers for living expenses in the winter, and it took eight years working summers to get out of debt," he continued. "The silver lining was that I stayed in school."

Velasquez related that he wasn't a very good student during grade school since he lacked a strong vocabulary.

"But I gained respect from the other students because I was good in sports," he said. "I wasn't a great athlete, but I had a ferocious work ethic from working in the fields. Compared to that, sports was a breeze."

He vividly recalled a seventh-grade football game in which he scored two or three touchdowns and was feeling "really good."

"Coming off the field one of my teammates looked at me and said, 'You played a great game, but you are still a dumb Mexican!'"

"That seared by soul," he admitted. "Right then I told myself that nobody is ever going to call me a 'dumb Mexican' again. By the end of that year, I was on the honor roll."

Velasquez stayed on the honor roll through his four years at Pandora-Gilboa High School, graduating in 1965. By the time he graduated from Bluffton College in 1969, he had gained national notoriety by starting FLOC and had met face-to-face with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez.

"One day when I was still a student at Bluffton College, I received a telegram from Dr. King," said Velasquez. "It was early in 1968 and he wanted me to come and work in his poor people's campaign."

"When I got down there I saw history before my very eyes. Dr. King explained that the poor people's movement was something that transcended race. He told me something I never forgot -- that whenever you impede a rich man's ability to make money, anything is negotiable."

Velasquez also met Chavez, who founded the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers.

"In negotiating with big companies, Chavez told me that, 'They've got money and we've got time, but no matter how much money they have we have more time.' That's something else I never forgot."

Under Velasquez's visionary leadership, FLOC's focus changed the structure of the agricultural industry through three-way negotiations among farmworkers, growers and corporations.

"Large companies like Campbell Soup, Heinz USA and Vlasic Pickle bought products on their own conditions," he said. "The farmer and workers had no say. When we approached Campbell Soup they said they weren't going to negotiate with people who were not their employees. The farmers they didn't want to buck the system so they were stuck in the middle."

It took eight years of marches and boycotts, but the company signed a blockbuster agreement with FLOC in 1986.

"The reason we were eventually a success is because we had put a doubt in consumers' minds about the company's products," said Velasquez. "Once the agreement was implemented, it was good for everyone. Worker productivity increased so the company made more money."

Since that time, FLOC signed a deal with North Carolina Growers Association with a sidebar agreement with the Mt. Olive Pickle Co. The farm labor union's current target is R.J. Reynolds tobacco company on behalf of 20,000 tobacco cutters in five southern states.

"They have the money and the power, but we have the time and nothing to lose," he said. "We will be there until Reynolds joins us in realizing justice for its tobacco field workers."

Turning to the immigration issue, he advocated a "freedom visa" giving workers the same rights as corporations to cross the borders between countries that have trade agreements in the search for economic well-being.

"Enforcement-only plans do very little to reduce the immigrant population living in the country without legal status, because the underlying causes of immigration are not addressed," he said. "That's especially true of policies created by the U.S. power elite to benefit the rich, such as the North American Free Trade Act."

"Before NAFTA there were six million Mexican corn farmers who were able to make a modest living," he said. "But in the last 15 years, they haven't been able to compete with U.S farmers with their high-tech methods and government subsidies. Those six million Mexican corn farmers were displaced in their own country, so where do you think they went?"

Added Velasquez: "I'm tired of sound bites from politicians like 'what part of illegal don't you understand?' Amnesty is an American principal. It's called forgiveness. In our criminal justice system, it's called plea bargaining.

"The latest beneficiary of amnesty is Scooter Libby, whose prison sentence was commuted. Will we see him on TV with Lou Dobbs or Bill O'Reilly being asked, 'What part of illegal don't you understand?' No.

"For every illegal worker, there is an illegal employer," he added. "Nobody seems concerned about them."

Velasquez said the current treatment of illegal immigrants goes against his Judeo Christian heritage.

"We need to remind ourselves that some of the best laws of our land have been those founded on scriptural principles," he said, quoting Exodus 22:21 ("do not mistreat or oppress the alien"), Numbers 15:15, ("govern the alien with the same laws as you govern yourself") and Leviticus 19:34: ("treat the alien like your native born").

"What kind of country are we becoming?" he continued. "Are we to become a hateful and oppressive society? Or will we become the best that we can be as a people?"

"Look, everytime I go somewhere I tell people how great this country is," he said. "America is truly the land of opportunity. But it won't happen automatically. We have to work for it."