

American Friends Service Committee

Graciela Martinez

A lifetime of support for farmworker rights and dignity

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By Willie Colón



For more than 50 years, Graciela Martinez has supported efforts to uphold the rights and dignity of farmworkers. She ranks the years she spent with AFSC's Proyecto Campesino (Farm Labor Program) in Visalia, California, among the most important in her life.

In 1997, Graciela was looking for a full-time job after years of running a paralegal business. Her search led her to Proyecto Campesino, which from 1955 to 2015 provided direct services to farmworkers as well as helping them advocate more effectively for better work and living conditions.

"I picked up the newspaper and opened to the help-wanted section," Graciela remembers. "I felt like something grabbed my neck and took

me straight to an ad for a program assistant for Proyecto Campesino. I got an application, and I knew that job was mine."

Graciela had actually worked with Proyecto Campesino over 30 years earlier, and knew firsthand about the struggles of farmworkers and their families.

As a girl, Graciela spent summers as a farmworker alongside her mother. When she graduated from high school in 1964, she joined Proyecto Campesino. There, she helped establish AFSC's Self-Help Housing Program—which worked with low-income farmers to develop a sense of community and construct their own homes—as an independent organization.

At that time, AFSC was also supporting the struggle to establish the United Farm Workers (UFW), and Graciela was introduced to influential labor leaders and civil rights activists Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. In 1965, Graciela went to work for the UFW, providing administrative support to the legal department and Cesar Chavez.

"Their work to make the life of farm workers better resonated with me since I come from a family of farm workers," Graciela says. "I saw firsthand the type of abuses that occur out in the fields and even as a very young child I didn't like to see my mother humiliated in front of me, because to me she was my God, my world revolved around her."

When Graciela returned to AFSC in 1997, one of her first assignments was to assist with a taskforce focused on relief efforts for farmworkers left jobless by a devastating freeze that year. "AFSC's role was to make sure that undocumented farmworkers were covered by relief efforts, too," she recalls.

Several years later, she became the program's first female director. In that capacity, she led local efforts to support AFSC's nationwide No Human Being Is Illegal campaign, which pushed for comprehensive immigration reform. The program also expanded its citizenship classes and responded to almost daily requests for help from farmworkers as they struggled to overcome language and economic barriers to access services and deal with harassment by local law enforcement.

Today, Graciela serves as clerk of the Visalia Friends Meeting. She's also a member of the AFSC Corporation and sits on the board of Self-Help Enterprises—the organization she helped establish in the 1960s. Looking back, Graciela says she feels blessed to have worked with Proyecto Campesino in support of farmworkers' rights. "It was," she says, "the most meaningful job of my career."