

# VISALIA TIMES DELTA

---

## A lifetime of service: Long time activist Graciela Martinez dead at 75

August 10, 2020

By: Eduardo Stanley

Graciela Martinez, a longtime community organizer with Self-Help Enterprises, Projecto Campesino and one-time secretary to Cesar Chavez, died in Visalia. She was 75 years old.

The Central Valley activist was born in Harlingen, Texas, and her family moved to California — as thousands of Texans have over the years — when she was a child. Her family worked in the fields.

When Martinez finished high school in 1964, she joined Visalia's Farm Labor Committee (FLC), a project of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). She worked as an assistant to Director Bard Mcallister.



Graciela Martinez

The national organization was distinguished in 1947 with the Nobel Peace Prize, a key factor in Martinez's wanting to join the group.

The Farm Labor Committee, created in 1955, was instrumental in bringing SCICON — the outdoor school of science and conservation operated by Tulare County Office of Education — to life in 1958.

A project of AFSC, a Quaker organization, was building affordable homes through self-help efforts. FLC promoted such efforts in Tulare County, building the first group of homes in Goshen. Due to the magnitude of the work and the plans for expansion, in 1965 the housing project became a separate organization, Self-Help Enterprises.

Self-Help has built more than 6,000 homes around the San Joaquin Valley.

Martinez was part of this transformation and Self-Help was always close to her heart. She was a board member long after she left the organization.

“There was a big need for people to have a home, but farmworkers couldn't afford one, they couldn't even get credit,” said Martinez during a 2016 long interview for KFCF. “Bard Macllister brought his experience on self-help home building from the East Coast and implemented it here. Later other Quakers followed him, they were qualified and enthusiastic builders.”

When Self-Help became an independent organization, Farm Labor Committee — later known as Proyecto Campesino — continued helping farmworkers in other areas.

When money for Martinez's position ran out, she moved to work as a secretary for Cesar Chavez in 1965, in Delano.

“I come from a farmworkers’ family, so I know the problems, it wasn’t hard to accommodate myself on the new job,” Martinez said.

She went on to stay for several years with the newly formed United Farm Workers (UFW).

The new office didn’t even have furniture, yet, but Martinez put her positive spirit to work.

“That summer, the summer of 1965, was unforgettable. Hundreds of students from colleges such as Stanford, Berkeley, Los Angeles, etc, came to Delano to volunteer for the UFW and the strike against grape growers,” Martinez said. “During that time, the UFW created the legal department which would be crucial for the UFW. Many battles were won on behalf of farmworkers. In those days, you didn’t have toilets or water in the fields, workers didn’t have rights of any kind.”

Martinez later became independent, working as a notary and doing income taxes while growing her family. She had four children; Jennifer, Richard, Hanna, and Rosita.

One morning, Martinez was having her coffee and reading the local newspaper when something grabbed her attention.

“I felt like something grabbed my neck and took me straight to an ad from Proyecto Campesino, yes, the same Farm Labor Committee I worked for several years back,” Martinez said. “They were looking for a program assistant. I knew that job was mine.”

She was hired on Dec. 1, 1997.

Almost immediately the freeze of 1998 hit the Valley, leaving thousands of farmworkers without jobs. Proyecto Campesino mobilized and was instrumental in helping hundreds of undocumented workers receive some kind of assistance.



Graciela Martinez, coordinadora de Proyecto Campesino, en su nueva oficina ubicada en Farmersville. November 2009.



Graciela Martinez helps Leonardo Cruz Santiago of Visalia sign for his United Way check at Memorial Park in Farmersville on Friday, April 27, 2007. Frente Indigena distributed assistance checks from United Way to citrus freeze victims at Memorial Park in Farmersville on Friday, April 27, 2007.

“Most farmworkers are undocumented, they work hard and get almost nothing, not even a decent pay,” Martinez said.

In 2001, she became the first female project director of Proyecto Campesino. Under her direction, the program continued assisting farmworkers and low-income residents. A successful citizenship program was implemented, helping dozens of immigrants to apply and get their US citizenship.

Martinez's dedication to improving farmworkers' lives was parallel to her interest in educating the society at large about the working and living conditions of immigrant workers in the Valley.

Proyecto Campesino was aware of the importance of the messaging and created “Radio Grito,” a radio show dedicated to informing farmworkers about their rights.

Martinez retired from Proyecto Campesino in 2010, but she never stopped working on behalf of those in need.