

Cesar Chavez Tribute to Wayne C. Hartmire

November 16, 1976

There are some disadvantages and some advantages to being first. Tonight I've learned really what the disadvantages are. The leadership of the union and those people who work with us—the farmworkers—everyone who knows about tonight in honoring Chris join with me to congratulate him and to really—more than that—to thank him for his service to the union.

I want to tell you and it is very difficult to do it in a short period of time because Chris' involvement and contributions to the movement of the farmworkers is very vast. Let me perhaps start by saying that 13 years ago... I'll never forget this... but Chris came to visit me at the East Los Angeles office of the Community Service Organization. I had in those days a dream a farmworkers union could be built. We went out to lunch and we talked. I was trying to be very polite and cautious. I was trying to tell Chris that I thought the Migrant Ministry had to really get in there with both feet and both hands and start swinging or they couldn't be of much help to what we were trying to do. I was really surprised that he... I tried to in a very diplomatic way one approach by saying that the work the migrant ministry had done in the time when I was a farmworker was okay and that under some of the most recent directors it changed and was even getting better.

But I thought it had to go all the way and really identify with the poor and really get in there and fight. So I suggested that one of the things the Migrant Ministry had to do in California was to openly endorse us. Do a resolution maybe. Chris didn't think this was too difficult. I took notice of that. So I suggested a little more, and by the time the luncheon was over I had just mentioned what I thought the Migrant Ministry should do, including going out there and getting church people and church groups to really stand behind us. And this was back in 1961.

We started the union in early 1962. There were not too many people who thought that, first of all, I should leave the CSO; secondly, that organizing a farmworkers union was possible, and thirdly that maybe I was insane. But Chris was one of the people who not only thought it should be done but that it was a good thing. We went the first week I was in Delano—very frightened but not willing to tell anyone—went to a Migrant Ministry staff meeting up in the hills away from Delano. And we talked about the beginning of the organizing of the union. Chris was very, by this time, firm in what he thought had to be done, and he assigned one of his staff people to work with me. I thought this was going to be suicide for the MM in California because the moment the fight started I knew what was going to happen. Jim Drake was then assigned to work with me. That was the beginning of many, many meetings and many, many conferences, but also the beginning of something—a relationship that I think is pretty unique in the movement. And I have relationships with many people. But the type of friendship that has developed between Chris and myself throughout these years is something that I think is very unique.

What people don't know is that Chris' contributions to the movement go far beyond

than just getting the church involved and getting the church groups to pass resolutions and to give us money and to be out front for us. I think that it goes way beyond that.

First of all, we know that Chris has converted more Protestants and Catholics and farmworkers to Christianity than any other man that I've known in my lifetime.

Secondly, it's a type of help that probably can only be understood by either someone trying to organize a farmworkers union in 1962 in California or a person about to drown. Never have been asked questions about asking Chris for help. In other words, never has there been a string. Never has there been a hesitation. Never has there been like 'I've done so much for you now' in a roundabout way you should do something for me. And it is very seldom in our movement that this has happened. Because when we least expect it someone will come back and collect from us. And I don't think that's bad. But I'm saying it's unique that Chris has never even suggested or hinted that we owed him anything in return.

There are two things that have happened very distinctly because of Chris' involvement. One is, we are able to attract church support, and in the early days of the struggle this was the difference between survival and being destroyed. I say today that as we look at farm labor history that most unions were destroyed in farm labor by red baiting and by anything else that anyone else could do. We know that. And we saved ourselves just by the skin of our teeth because of Chris' involvement. He was able to lend credibility to our just emerging group. And doing it in such a way that it went beyond just credibility but it went into much support and love from many, many people. The support that came then from the people that Chris organized for us has been very lasting, as has Chris' support. Now the other part that very few people know is that

among the leadership of the union and movement Chris occupies a place there. Don't ask me to describe it or structure it—I don't know—but it is there. And the other thing is that in terms of counseling and being a friend in time of need, in terms of family in times of crisis for the union Chris has been the person that I instinctively go to to sort of talk things over with. Contribution then because of what he is and because of his tremendous faith has spilled over into the union in such a way that today the farmworker movement has a lot of spirit. And that spirit just didn't grow because of accident. That spirit very definitely has a lot to do with Chris' direct involvement in what we do in the movement. And so that honoring Chris tonight is really like the first time I've been able to do this: to be able to say these things, but really to say 'Thank you' for what he's done.

We've been in many hot spots together. And I think we'll be in many hot spots together, and I welcome that. It has always been with tremendous respect on his part for the downtrodden and the exploited. I mean genuine and complete understanding about the value of human beings. I don't remember ever having to in any way either to reject or reproach or be quiet—in any way felt that Chris had said something that was not in keeping with the ideal we have about human beings and farmworkers. I know he is not pretending, because when you pretend sooner or later things happen. Never once. So that... ourselves--myself personally and the leadership of the union—pull this respect, and this friendship.

You know, sometimes when we get together on the board and we all agree that we take advantage of Chris. Everybody will say, almost in unison, "That's right, that's right, we shouldn't do that." But no sooner is the meeting over than we go do the same thing. It's a habit. During the period when we had very few friends, and almost no true friends,

we acquired that habit. And we've had it since then. But it's also, I think, being comfortable... The difference is being comfortable asking someone for a favor or for help, as to being reluctant or doing because you must and really don't want to do it.

The Migrant Ministry has grown. And the farmworker movement has grown. And we've made a lot of discoveries in that time. And we've shared an awful lot of sorrows. But an awful lot of victories and joys, too, you know. When you share with your friends' victories and joys most are there, you know. But when you have to deal with and grapple with a defeat, or maybe a sorrow, not all of them are there. And those that are there always stand up. They are always there and not only there but doing the right thing at the right time. There are not many in this world—not many that I know of, and Chris is there.

So, really tonight, we are saying, for all the time we have taken him for granted, and God knows it's just like every day. For all the times we have said, "Oh, jeez, we forgot Chris." And for all the times we have sinned that way, I suppose, against his person and tremendous dedication to the things we are doing we thank him for it. We feel tonight it's a great night for us. The only regret I have is that it is not in California so that more people could have been there from the union. Other than that we are happy and congratulate him and we join with you in wishing him well.

And Chris, before I leave I have to ask you another little favor...