

San Antonio's connection to the UFW



Left to right: President Obama with Helen Chávez at her husband's gravesite in the town of Keene, California, site of the new national monument; Arturo Rodríguez, UFW president with Helen Chávez, Obama and Dolores Huerta; and locally, Arturo Rodríguez, District 5 Council Woman Shirley Gonzáles and Henry Rodríguez of LULAC.

By: Gloria Almaraz

Arturo Rodríguez, President of the United Farm Workers (UFW), spoke to a group at Las Palmas Library on April 25th saying, "I never thought it possible," as he spoke about the UFW signing a contract with Gallo Wines in the state of Washington.

Mr. Rodríguez succeeded César Chávez who, along with Dolores Huerta, founded the organization in 1962. In his speech, he gave a history of the farmworkers' movement, his own involvement and provided insight into what the union is currently doing.

Born and raised in San Antonio, Mr. Rodríguez was a student at St. Margaret Mary School and La Salle High School. He received his undergraduate degree in sociology from St. Mary's University. His interest in the farm workers' plight was sparked by his parish priest, Father Marvin Doerfler, who had been active in the Rio Grande Valley and was arrested in in the melon pickers strikes. Arturo's father, a sheet metal worker, was supportive of César Chávez's work for the farm workers in California.

Mr. Rodríguez was convinced to continue his education at the University of Michigan by fellow San Antonian, Rebecca Flores, already at the university. His interest in the farmworkers' movement escalated after meeting César Chávez who spoke on campus. Later, he met Richard Chávez, César's brother, who was recruiting on campus. In time, he helped organize boycotts of lettuce and grapes at Detroit supermarkets. He received his Master's in sociology from the University of Michigan in 1973 and joined the UFW with César Chávez as his "mentor for 20 years." With César Chávez's passing on April 23, 1993, Arturo Rodríguez was asked to head the organization.

Rodríguez informed the Las Palmas audience that he is now "negotiating with growers and retailers in several states for better wages and working conditions. Other areas that the UFW is currently involved in are: political and legislative work to improve farmworkers' working and living conditions, medical benefits, unemployment benefits, overtime pay, heat exposure, farm safety, use of pesticides, affordable housing, etc.

While most of us have heard of the grape boycotts and marches in Delano, California during the 1960's, few have heard of the march

that took place in Texas from Rio Grande City to Austin in the summer of 1966 to protest the wages that Texas farmworkers were being paid to harvest cantaloupes. Along the way, protesters were beaten by Texas Rangers and arrested by Starr County sheriff deputies.

Farmworkers who earned \$.40 an hour requested that Texas Governor John Connally call a special session of the legislature to raise the minimum wage to \$1.25. The governor refused to meet with the marchers, who numbered more than 10,000; and it wasn't until 1970 that the minimum wage was increased to \$1.40. These events became the catalyst for the Chicano movement in Texas.

A 50th anniversary of that 400-mile march is being planned this summer in several Texas cities with San Antonio commemorating the observance with a mass on September 5, Labor Day, at San Fernando Cathedral to be celebrated by San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo Siller. The mass will be followed by a march to Milam Park.

Mr. Rodríguez announced that the UFW has been successful in signing several contracts with growers. Union membership is also on the rise in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Washington D.C. Colorado will soon join.

An interesting addition to Mr. Rodríguez talk was his mention that on May 12, 2012 President Obama visited the 116-acre National Chávez Center in Keene, California and designated a portion of the property as the César E. Chávez National Monument, the 398th monument to be so named and the first national park site to honor a contemporary Latino American.

The site served as national headquarters for the UFW, home and workplace for César Chávez and his family from the 1970's to the time of his death in 1993, the Chávez Center, and his gravesite.

If elected as President of the United States, Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic Party presidential candidate, has indicated that immigration would be one of the first issues she would pursue within 100 days of being in office and has asked Mr. Rodríguez to chair a national immigration policy committee.

For more on the Cesar E. Chavez National Monument go to www.nationalparks.org and for more on the 1966 Texas march go to www.farmworkers2016.org.

Bio: Gloria Almaraz, who graduated from Brackenridge High School is a free lance journalist in San Antonio.