

# Cesar Estrada Chavez

César Estrada Chávez was born on March 31, 1927. Chávez dedicated his life to serving humanity by improving the working conditions of migrant farm workers in America and advancing the ideals of equality and civil rights for everyone. In 1962, Chávez founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), later renamed the United Farm Workers (UFW). The UFW became the voice of migrant farm workers throughout the United States. Like his contemporary, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Chávez used nonviolent reform, such as pickets, boycotts and peaceful demonstrations. The UFW and Chávez had many accomplishments – establishing minimum wage standards, wage contracts, safer working conditions, child labor reform, and advancement in civil rights for Chicanos and other farm workers.

Chávez’s dedication to farm workers and civil rights grew out of influential childhood experiences. First, Chávez was the victim of discrimination in his early childhood education. Though used to speaking Spanish at home, he and his classmates were not allowed to speak Spanish while at school. In the integrated schools Chávez attended, minority students were treated like outsiders and constantly encountered racism – from “whites only” signs to being hit with rulers for speaking Spanish. As the son of a migrant farm worker, he had attended thirty-seven different schools by the time he graduated from eighth grade. Chávez did not attend high school. When his father had an accident that made him unable to work in the fields, Chávez quit school to help support his family. Yet, education continued to be important to him, and, as an adult, Chávez became an advocate for education for all.

A second important event occurred when Chávez’s father was deceived into entering a business agreement that eventually caused the family to lose their land and assets. Librado Chávez, César’s father, applied for a loan to purchase some land. But, the Chávez family was unable to pay back the loan. Librado entered a work agreement with the land-owner, but was still unable to pay the interest on the loan. A dishonest lawyer who had previously advised Librado regarding the original loan bought the land from him and sold it back to the original owner.

The third formative event occurred when Chávez was older. In 1944, Chávez enlisted in the U.S. Navy. One night while waiting to join the Pacific fleet for active duty during World War II, he decided to go to three movies. He was in California. While at the movies, Chávez was



arrested for sitting in the “whites only” section of the theatre. He remembered this as one of many racist encounters in his life.

Chávez returned to California and to his life as a farm worker from his Navy post in 1946. While working, he met Helen Fabela. In 1948, the couple married. Eventually, César and Helen Chávez had eight children together.

Due to the injustices that Chávez faced as a child and young adult, he became passionate about improving the way of life for farm workers and for his people. In 1952, while Chávez worked in California, Fred Ross recruited him to be part of the Community Service Organization ([www.ufw.org](http://www.ufw.org)). Through the CSO, Chávez helped Latinos register to vote and to advocate for the civil rights of Latino Americans. By working for the CSO, he gained valuable skills as a community organizer and leader.

In 1962, Chávez founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), later renamed United Farm Workers (UFW). By founding UFW, Chávez furthered his dedication to promote the racial equality and dignity of farm workers. The workers had few resources to help them stand up for their civil rights and especially feared risking the loss of their jobs. Though farm work was poorly paid and dangerous to the health, in many migrant families, men, women and children all worked in the fields to ensure the survival of the family. Organizing the UFW was difficult due to the transient lives of the workers. They endured long working hours in harsh conditions for meager wages and had little time for activities outside of work. However, in 1965, Chávez and the NFWA joined a group of Filipino farm workers and began a boycott that lasted five years against the Delano, California grape growers. In fact, throughout the 1960s and 70s, Chávez led many boycotts against grape growers. In 1966, he negotiated his first union contract with Schenley Vineyards. During 1967-70, the grape boycott became an international demonstration with people in many countries refusing to purchase grapes as a sign of support for the UFW.

Another peaceful reform tactic that Chávez used was fasting. In 1968, Chávez began his first fast. It lasted for 25 days and was an attempt to keep the farm workers dedicated to non-violent reform tactics. Senator Robert F. Kennedy traveled to California to visit with Chávez, at which time he broke his fast. Chávez and the UFW investigated the effects of pesticides on the health of the farm workers. Growers often used pesticides, which contained carcinogens. Children, working in the fields, were particularly vulnerable to the illnesses caused by the pesticides. In fact, unborn fetuses absorb the harmful chemicals through their mothers' exposure. In 1988, Chávez fasted for 36 days, only drinking water, in what was called the



Fast for Life. Numerous influential people and celebrities participated, including Reverend Jesse Jackson. The Fast drew attention to the effects of harmful pesticides on consumers.

Chávez remained active in the fight for justice and in his proficiency to organize nonviolent demonstrations for workers and civil rights his entire life. The UFW website, [www.ufw.org](http://www.ufw.org), has a comprehensive list of the boycotts, strikes and demonstrations that were led by him. On April 23, 1993, César Chávez died. At his funeral services, 40,000 mourners marched behind the casket. President Bill Clinton presented the United States Medal of Freedom to César Chávez posthumously on August 8, 1994.

Chávez spent his entire life working to right injustices that plagued his people and countless others. The battle he began continues today through the United Farm Workers Union which protects and advocates for the rights of farm workers. In addition, Chávez's example and the accomplishments of UFW inspired the formation of many Chicano and Latino organizations and the use of organized boycotts and peaceful protest to address subsequent social issues.

From the Learning to Give Briefing paper by Amelia E. Clark found at <http://www.learningtogive.org/papers/index.asp?bpid=84>.

