

Dolores Huerta

Teaching Experience

“When I was a teacher, and farm worker children, which, by the way, were Anglo children . . . , I would [go] into the school rooms and . . . try to speak on their behalf to the principal, who, by the way, was also from Arkansas. [I would] . . . try to get some free milk, or vouchers for shoes, or lunches for the children. His response was, ‘Well, you know their parents don’t take care of their money. They just go out there and drink up all their money, and that’s why they don’t have money for food or clothes.’ And I knew that wasn’t the case because I was working with farm workers. I knew that they worked hard all day long, but they just weren’t paid anything, and I think that made me a little angry.

And also to see that the other teachers were so disconnected from the children. The teachers were into their own personal lives . . . Then they had a stable salary so their conversations were about their vacations and new cars . . . They’re teaching all these children that are just in poverty, so I just felt that I didn’t fit there. I felt more comfortable being out with the children. I would volunteer to do yard duty everyday so I wouldn’t have to sit there in the lunchroom with the teachers.”

Women’s Roles

“My mother was the one who raised us, so I never really saw women in a passive role because my mother was a businesswoman, and she was active in the community. She was active in the Comisión Honorífica. She was active in this other organization that I mentioned. Later on, we started the Community Service Organization. She was very active and took on a leadership role. In my growing up, I never saw women as being subservient or passive. I think it was when I became an adult--especially when I came to work with the farm workers--that I saw women in a whole different role, because in my experience growing up . . . In our household, we were equal--my two brothers and myself. My brothers had to wash dishes and make beds. My mother had this hotel, and we divided all of the work equally. I never thought that women had to be in a second class category, ever. It was the opposite. My mother was definitely the leader in our family.”

Taking Ownership

“The main purpose of organizing is to develop leadership, and to develop leadership . . . , the people you are organizing have to own the organization, and for them to own the organization, then they’ve got to take it over. It’s very easy for people who think they are organizing to always be in sort of a position where they’re telling people what to do instead of letting them take over the organization and start doing the work, making the mistakes, learning from their mistakes. So, this is why when we started the union, César and myself, you know, we wanted to try and make it a little different.”