



ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR

Ana Maria Espinoza

Riverside City College, Class of 1975

Director of missionary organization,

His for the Fields, and United Farm Workers Union activist

To the crowd gathered in Calexico to hear farm labor leader Cesar Chavez in 1974, it was a calming embrace. For Ana Maria Espinoza, it was the beginning of a life-long journey.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” Espinoza said.

She was among a group of students from Riverside City College and UC Riverside, who had chartered Greyhound buses and packed U-Haul trucks with food for the trip to donate money they had raised for the United Farmer Workers Union.

Espinoza had been asked to present Chavez with the check.

“I was shaking and trembling,” she remembers. “He knew I was scared and he put his arm around me to give me support. The minute he touched me, I went crazy! A thousand people screaming and shouting, it was a moment I’ll never forget.”

The 1970s proved to be a pivotal time in the movement for change in the world from Margaret Thatcher becoming the first female British Prime Minister to the United Nations recognizing the People’s Republic of China. In 1975, California enacted the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, creating a collective bargaining unit for farmworkers. The landmark legislation followed years of strikes, lawsuits and boycotts, marred by violence and even deaths on the picket lines.

Espinoza, who earned a nursing degree from RCC, credits the College for developing her passion for change and social justice. She came seeking purpose in her life, and it was at RCC where things began to click.

“It took me a long time to graduate from a two-year college,” said Espinoza, who graduated from Corona High School in 1970 and from RCC in 1975, “but I was working to support myself and I was really involved with the union movement. I wouldn’t change one day of my time at RCC. It was where I needed to be at that time in my life. I met key people and made friendships that would last a lifetime. Those people influenced my life for the better and gave me a whole new perspective on life.”

Change came with an English class current events assignment. The assignment led her to Chavez and his cause. After completing the paper, Espinoza felt a need to meet the workers’ rights activist. She and her friend, Pete Torres, learned Chavez would be speaking in San Bernardino about the grape boycott and they both attended.

“To this day I remember what he said: ‘Once you walk the picket line, you’ll

never be the same again.”

A month later, Espinoza heard about picket lines going up in the Coachella Valley. She climbed into her red VW Beetle and headed down Interstate 10, knowing the experience would change her life.

“There, his passion became my passion. I remember thinking to myself ‘this is the cause that I’d been looking for my entire life,’” she said. “Before that, I did not have anywhere to sink my roots. This was it – social justice for the people.

“I remember him saying: dress like the people, eat like the people, eat with the people, consume yourself with the people, you are here to serve them, they are not here to serve you. His cause became my cause.”

Today, Espinoza runs His for the Fields, a non-profit organization in Mexico that works with field workers and their families to address social injustices, which remain prevalent in the fields today. Her organization feeds 500 people daily and mentors the women and children, some who can’t read or write, giving them a chance to escape the harsh, backbreaking work in the fields.

“I want them to have a vision of the world, get out of the fields, get an education,” Espinoza said.

Her organization isn’t funded by corporations or foundations, but by friends, relatives and people who share her vision. Her cause resonates close to home, having had grandparents and a father who worked the fields. She also is founder and director of a training center to teach young people to be missionaries.

Not long ago, Espinoza walked into the feeding area and heard the roosters crowing, the people speaking in their Indian dialect and smelled the fires burning.

“I asked myself why do I do what I do,” Espinoza recalled. “And then, I remembered. I once heard a man by the name of Cesar Chavez and he said ‘once you walk the picket line you would never be the same.’ I have never left the fields because of a passion to help the people who are underprivileged. I’ve given my life to it.”

Espinoza’s eyes widened and for a moment the woman who marched from student to activist, from nurse to missionary, fell quiet, not ready to let go of the cherished memory. When she speaks again, her words flow like irrigation water spreading across a field.

“I come from a background where we saw poverty, suffering. Yet, I live and work in the fields and I am one happy person. I believe we’re here, put on this earth, to make replicas of ourselves, to influence, impart, to give purpose to lives, to hug, love, look into their eyes, remember their names, and be passionate like Cesar Chavez.

“He looked us in our eyes; he touched us. He was an encourager and I want to be an encourager. I want to be that person who makes a difference in people’s lives, like Jesus and the apostles. I am getting older, and I think when it is all over what did I give to the world? I don’t want to lie down and die and say my life was empty, I did nothing.”