



Biography of Cesar E. Chavez

Cesar Estrada Chavez, Senator Robert F. Kennedy noted, was "one of the heroic figures of our time." A true American hero, Cesar was a civil rights, Latino, farm worker, and labor leader; a religious and spiritual figure; a community servant and social entrepreneur; a crusader for nonviolent social change; and an environmentalist and consumer advocate. He was best known for his work on behalf of farm workers.

A second-generation American, Cesar was born on March 31, 1927, near his family's farm in Yuma, Arizona. At age 10, his family became migrant farm workers after losing their farm in the Great Depression. Cesar and his family migrated across the southwest laboring in the fields and vineyards, where he was exposed to the hardships and injustices of farm worker life.

He attended more than 30 elementary and middle schools. After achieving an eighth-grade education, Cesar left school to work in the fields full-time to support his family. Although his formal education ended then, he possessed an insatiable curiosity, and was self-taught in many fields and well read throughout his life. As a matter of fact, when Cesar passed away, the book he was reading on Native American culture was still on his chest.

Cesar joined the US Navy in 1946, with the belief that it would provide for him more opportunities beyond working in the fields. He served in the Western Pacific in the aftermath of World War II. When he returned to California the only work he found was as a farm worker, and was contemptuous at the fact that he still faced such limited opportunities. This is when he felt his calling to be a force of change.

He returned from service to marry Helen Fabela, whom he had met working in the vineyards of central California. The Chavez family settled in the East San Jose barrio of Sal Si Puedes (get out if you can), and would eventually have eight children and thirty-one grandchildren.

Cesar's life as a community organizer began in 1952 when he joined the Community Service Organization (CSO), a prominent Latino civil rights group. While with the CSO, Cesar coordinated voter registration drives and conducted campaigns against racial and economic discrimination. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cesar served as CSO's national director.

Cesar's dream, however, was to create an organization to protect and serve farm workers, whose poverty and disenfranchisement he had shared. In 1962, Cesar resigned from the CSO, leaving the security of a regular paycheck to found the National Farm Workers Association along with Dolores Huerta, which later became the United Farm Workers of America.

For more than three decades Cesar led the first successful farm workers union in American history, achieving countless rights and protections for hundreds of thousands of farm workers. Against previously insurmountable odds, he led successful strikes and boycotts that resulted in the first industry-wide labor contracts in the history of American agriculture. His union's efforts brought about the passage of the groundbreaking 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act to protect farm workers. Today, it remains the only law in the nation that protects the farm workers' right to unionize.

The significance and impact of Cesar's life transcends any one cause or struggle. He was a unique and humble leader, who influenced and inspired millions of Americans to fight for social justice and civil rights for the poor and disenfranchised in our society. Cesar forged a diverse national coalition of students, middle class consumers, trade unionists, religious groups, and minorities.

A strong believer in the principles of nonviolence practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar effectively employed peaceful tactics such as fasts, boycotts, strikes, and pilgrimages. In 1968 he fasted for 25 days to affirm his personal commitment and that of the farm labor movement to non-violence. He fasted again for 25 days in 1972, and in 1988, at the age of 61, he endured a 36-day "Fast for Life" to highlight the harmful impact of pesticides on farm workers and their children.

Cesar passed away in his sleep on April 23, 1993, in San Luis, Arizona, only miles from his birthplace of 66 years earlier. More than 50,000 people attended his funeral services in the small town of Delano, California, the same community in which he had planted his seed for social justice. Cesar's life cannot be measured in material terms. He never earned more than \$6,000 a year. He never owned a house. When Cesar passed, he had no savings to leave to his family.

His motto in life – *si se puede* (it can be done) – embodies the uncommon and invaluable legacy he left for the world's benefit. Since his death, dozens of communities across the nation have renamed schools, parks, streets, libraries, other public facilities, awards and scholarships in his honor, as well as enacting holidays on his birthday, March 31. In 1994, the year after his death, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in America.

Cesar Chavez – a common man with an uncommon vision for humankind – stood for equality, justice, and dignity for all Americans. His principles remain relevant and inspiring today for all people. In 1993, his family and friends established the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation to educate people about the life and work of this great American civil rights leader, and to engage all, particularly youth, to carry on his values and timeless vision for a better world.

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