**Wisdom Watch: Dolores Huerta**

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

I'm Michel Martin, and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News.

Just ahead: a listener questions our coverage of issues pertaining to black men. Her pointed comments gave me something to think about. I'll tell you what I came up with in my Can I Just Tell You? commentary. That's later.

But first, it's time for Wisdom Watch, our conversation with leaders who've gone before us, people with experience and knowledge - not just smart, but wise.

Today, we talked to a woman whose name has been synonymous with the labor movement for more than five decades - Dolores Huerta. First vice president of the United Farm Workers Union - it was only one of the organizations she founded working alongside the late Cesar Chavez.

Huerta worked with Chavez for over 30 years, until his death in 1993. Together, they founded the Robert Kennedy Medical Plan, the Farm Workers Credit Union, the first medical and pension plans and credit union in history for farm workers. They also formed the National Farm Workers Service Center, which today provides affordable housing with over 3,700 rental and 600 single-family dwelling units.

And Huerta is still at it. At 77, she is still involved in political struggles for workers, for women and for the next generation of activists. She heads up the Dolores Huerta Foundation, and she joins me from her office in Bakersfield, California. Welcome.

Ms. DOLORES HUERTA (President, Dolores Huerta Foundation; Co-founder, United Farmer Workers Union): No, it's my pleasure.

MARTIN: Can I call you Dolores?

Ms. HUERTA: Yes, please do.

MARTIN: Would that be okay?

Ms. HUERTA: Mm-hmm.

MARTIN: So Dolores, I think a lot of people would assume based on your background that you grew up in the fields as a farm worker or working alongside your parents, and that's how you got your start in these issues. But you didn't.

Ms. HUERTA: No. Actually, my father in New Mexico was farm worker. I remember as a little girl going down to the beet fields in the Dakotas and in Nebraska and Wyoming as migrant workers when I was very, very small, like, I was, like, 5 years old, I believe. And I remember going out there, you know, traveling to these states and living in these little tarpaper shacks that they had in Wyoming.

My dad was very intelligent, had a very strong personality. I was amazed with my father. I did spend one summer with him. And I think his dedication to the labor movement was the one thing that left a lasting impression on me because he was totally dedicated to workers.

MARTIN: But your mother was an entrepreneur. She had a hotel. I mean, she had restaurant and you helped her run.

Ms. HUERTA: Yes. My mother was a dominant force in our family. And I always saw her as the leader. And that was great for me as a young woman, because I never saw that women had to be dominated by men. So I kind of -- I give credit to my mother for, you know, being able to have the confidence to go out there and do the things that I did.

MARTIN: So how did you get interested in farm workers rights?

Ms. HUERTA: Well, actually, in this organization that we started called the Community Service Organization which originated at Los Angeles, many of the members were farm workers. And in hearing some of the issues that they were facing of not getting paid very much for the arduous hard work that they did, then that became a very -- one of our big issues that we had in the Community Service Organization, and subsequently led to my organizing a group of farm workers in an organization called the Agricultural Workers Association, which was then taken over by the AFL-CIO to become the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

Cesar Chavez and I met in the Community Service Organization. And Cesar had also organized large groups of farm workers in the Oxnard, California area. What happened, though, to both of those organizations is after we turned them over to their labor unions, they sort of fell apart. And it was at that point that Cesar said we've got to do it ourselves and not turn over the workers that we organized to other groups.

MARTIN: Was it frightening for you being out there like that, trying to organize workers? It's likely the -- and no disrespect to anybody, but it's not generally assumed that, you know, farmers are not generally interested in having their workers be organized. Most people are, I would assume.

Ms. HUERTA: Well, it's even worse than that, unfortunately. I mean, when we started the union, Cesar said, you know, we will not see farm workers organize in our lifetime because the growers are too rich, they're too powerful and they're too racist. And unfortunately, that prediction was true. And even though when the workers are able to organize into a union, the relationships with the employers - not only do they improve, but the actual work improves because the workers are out there in the fields. They know what needs to be done with the crops themselves, and they can really help the employer.

It becomes more of a team than an adversary type of relationship, but it takes a lot to get the employers to accept that. And a lot of that is really based on racism, because it's very difficult for them to see that the workers - most of them of which are people of people of color, whether they be Latinos, African- Americans or Asians - it's very hard for them to sit across the table with their workers as equals. And I believe that that's one of the big drawbacks, that it's been difficult for the employers to accept farm workers in a labor organization.

MARTIN: Did you ever feel resistance to your leadership because you're a woman?

Ms. HUERTA: Not so much from the farm workers. The farm workers themselves always followed my lead and my suggestions, my ideas. The only place where I've felt resistance was from other male leadership that always kind of challenged my leadership. And I had always felt that I had to keep fighting for my ideas and my position. And not so much with Cesar...

MARTIN: Yeah, I was going to ask you. What about Cesar? Was he one of those that you had to, like, say, hey, buddy. I'm in this, too. I'm right here.

Ms. HUERTA: No. Cesar was actually very good about promoting women in leadership. And he and I would have disagreements about tactics, not philosophies or vision, but about different ways to do things - be it the Gape Boycott or what we should be boycotting or different tactics and means of accomplishment.

And I kind of always felt that this was, you know, the masculine view as against the feminist view of the way of doing things. But at the end of the day, we would come out with, you know, some type of a strategy that usually worked. And sometimes Cesar won the argument, and many times I won the argument. But the great thing is that we did have these dialogues. And that was a great thing about Cesar, is that he's surrounded himself with people that didn't always agree with him.

MARTIN: If you're just joining us, we're speaking with Dolores Huerta. She is the co-founder of the United Farm Workers, along with the late Cesar Chavez. It's a Wisdom Watch conversation. How did you all come up with the idea for the Grape Boycott?

Ms. HUERTA: Well, actually it came out of a discussion, as many great ideas do happen. We were actually in a meeting in Cesar's office, and the growers had gotten an injunctions against us so that we couldn't pick at the fields. We could only have five people to a thousand-acre field. So we were kind of stymied, how do we win this strike? And one of the young attorneys -- his name was Stu Weinberg from the Bay Area of San Francisco - he said, hey, he said, have you ever thought of doing the boycott?

And this is, of course, when they had done the boycott in Montgomery, Alabama when the Congress of Racial Equality was boycotting car dealerships because they had no African-Americans as distributors. And so we said, huh, that's a novel idea. So we did it. So we did our very first boycott against the company called Schenley. It was a wine company that had some grape vineyards. And then we did the major Grape Boycott. But it really grew out of a discussion.

MARTIN: And I'm glad you brought that up, because in the African-American community, some are questioning whether some of the tactics that were used in the earlier civil rights struggle are now still relevant. And I wonder whether you feel that there's the same discussion going on in the Latino community about the issues that are still very pressing. I mean, as you point out, the conditions for farmer workers still are not ideal in some places. There are still issues around discrimination that many people experience. And many people wonder whether a kind of direct activism is still the way to go. What are your thoughts about that?

Ms. HUERTA: No, I think it's the only way to go. And I believe in the Latino community because of the immigration debate, which brought all of the Latino communities to the streets, I mean, the first of 2006. And I think the one thing that sort of kept that strategy from functioning at this point is that a target has not really been identified that would really, you know, put the type of economic pressure to stop these attacks on the immigrant community. But there are discussions going on as we speak about, okay, who do we target? Who do we boycott?

MARTIN: Dolores, can I just ask you? There are those who would argue that your tactics are divisive. It makes it harder for people to come together as it were, that having such a confrontational stance - it sort of pits people against each other.

Ms. HUERTA: No. I understand how people might say that. I think whenever you confront issues where people are -- don't we care about other people? Sure, they might say it's confrontational or it's a conflict. But, you know, as Gandhi said, conflicts aren't necessarily bad. When you have a conflict, that means that there are truths that have to be addressed on each side of the conflict. And when you have a conflict, then it's an educational process to try to resolve the conflict. And to resolve that, you have to get people on both sides of the conflict involved so that they can dialogue.

And if we go back to the civil rights movement, again, you know, without young people sitting into the lunch counters, you know, then you never would have gotten rid of Jim Crow. You know, without Dr. King's marches in communities that were very anti-African American, you know, we never would have gotten voting rights for African-Americans. Without the Grape Boycott, farmer workers today wouldn't have toilets in the fields or drinking water or rest period or a decent wage, you know? Or the right to organize, which many farmers all over the country still don't have worker's compensation, unemployment insurance or the right to organize outside of California.

So, you know, conflict isn't necessarily bad. It's how we resolve the conflicts. So if we can do this in a non-violent way - which is, of course, the philosophy of the Farm Workers Union and the philosophy of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, then this is the way that we make the world a better place.

MARTIN: Dolores, you have a few children, as I recall.

Ms. HUERTA: Yes, I have 11.

MARTIN: Eleven?

Ms. HUERTA: Mm-hmm.

Ms. HUERTA: How on earth did you raise 11 children and have a career as an organizer?

Ms. HUERTA: Well, first of all, I sort of had them, I'd say, in batches, I - because I had two children, I divorced and remarried and had five more children. I divorced again. But, actually, there was a lot of people that helped. Cesar Chavez's wife, Helen Chavez, you know, she had some of my children living with her. My different relatives, my brother -- he took some of my kids for a while. And, you know, different - they were always kind of farmed out.

And then, of course, they traveled with me. I took them to New York when I was working on the Grape Boycotts in New York City. And again, different people, you know, kind of chipped in. We didn't get wages in the union, you know? We work for subsistence for $5 a week, and then we get to raise to $10 a week. But -- and we worked for our food and our rent, and all the money that we were able to gather went into the organization. But my kids grew up pretty resourceful.

MARTIN: Did you ever have mommy guilt?

Ms. HUERTA: Oh, a lot. Yeah. I mean, yeah, as a mother - but I just want to say this to all mothers out there that the greatest gift that we can give to our children is values. And one of the biggest values that we can give them is that they know that their lives here on this earth are to help make the world a better place and to give our lives as service to others. And I can assure all mothers out there that the rewards that you will get for your children are just incredible.

They will be strong. They will have a social conscience. And instead of, you know, encouraging our children to be materialistic, it would kind of encourage them to give up themselves, to give up their time, of their energy to help other people. We shouldn't say to our children do you want to go on this march? Do you want to go on this vigil? Do you want to go with me to the homeless? You say, say, hey, we are going. I'm taking you. We don't give them a choice to say no.

MARTIN: Why do you stay at it? As I said, you're 77. I mean, you could be forgiven if you want to spend some time knitting - playing bingo or whatever.

Ms. HUERTA: Yeah, I would love to do that, actually. But, actually, there's so much work to be done. Still today, we have, in our society, we are so segregated that we really don't know what other segments of our society are going through, the kind of suffering that they're going through. And we need to come together. So I believe that my mission is to, you know, carry on, to pass on the organizing skills that I learned from (unintelligible), who was the (unintelligible) and my mentor in organizing, so that we can continue to develop strong communities to make people realize that they have power, but that they also have a responsibility. We've got to have civic participation.

We've got to have collective action. We've got to make our political officials accountable. And then we've got to get ourselves elected people that care about community and care about democracy, you know, about working people.

MARTIN: All right. Dolores Huerta is the president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation. She was a co-founder of the United Farm Workers, and she joined us from her office in Bakersfield, California. Dolores, thank you so much for speaking with us.

Ms. HUERTA: Oh, thank you very much.

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