Dolores: A Leader for Justice

By Wendy Greenfield
Dolores Huerta is known in California and throughout the United States as an important leader. She’s a leader for justice.
Dolores was born on April 10, 1930. She and her parents were all born in Dawson, New Mexico, a coal mining town. Her mother was Alicia St. John Chavez and her father was Juan Fabián Fernandez. Her father worked long hours as a farmworker, a miner and an activist. He spoke up for his fellow workers when they had problems. He was a sailor in World War II. Later he was elected to be a representative in the state legislature of New Mexico.
When Dolores was two years old, her parents divorced. When she was six years old, her mother brought her children to Stockton, California. Dolores’ mother worked hard to support them. She saved money so she could own her own restaurant, the “Delta Café” and a hotel. Dolores learned that women could stand up for themselves. She saw her mother let people stay in the hotel or eat in the café who didn’t have food or homes and Dolores learned that it was important to take care of people in need.
Dolores became a teacher. She saw that some children in her class were hungry. She wanted to do something to make change.

Dolores met a man named Fred Ross who told her how people could solve their problems by coming together and taking direct, non-violent action. They organized a group called the Community Service Organization. She learned to invite people to meetings so they could talk about the problems they were facing in their “barrios” (neighborhoods) and they could decide on what non-violent actions they would take to fix problems like not having enough food, not being paid enough for their work and being treated badly because their families had come from other countries like Mexico or the Philippines.
Dolores married and had many children. Their names were Lori, Celeste, Fidel, Emilio, Vincent, Alicia, Angela, Juanita, Maria Elena, Ricardo and Camila. Her children learned to go to meetings with her when they were very young. Sometimes she had to go away to organize far from home, and they would miss her, but she always had someone to take care of them.
Dolores started a organization called the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA) because she saw that farmworkers worked very hard for long hours and were paid very little. Many of the workers in Stockton were Filipinos who were experiencing racism, people treating them badly because of the color of their skin or the country they came from. Dolores knew people shouldn’t be treated that way and she spoke out.
Fred Ross introduced her to an organizer named Cesar Chavez who was working with the Community Service Organization (CSO). The CSO registered people to vote in elections so their representatives would pass laws that helped their communities.

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta both wanted to organize farmworkers to fight for justice. They decided to work together.
Dolores and Cesar wanted to make life better for farmworkers. *Farmworkers were paid so little that their children had to work long hours in the fields so that their families had money to buy food.* Instead of going to school, they had to work in the hot sun with no drinking water or toilets.

Together Dolores and Cesar started an organization called the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). They met with farmworkers in their homes and talked about how they could make change in the fields.
Dolores had recruited Larry Itliong to help form the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA) in Stockton, which later became the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC). In 1965, Larry led AWOC members on strike. The workers told the growers that they wouldn’t work until they were treated with respect and paid more money for their work.

Larry asked the National Farm Workers Association to support them in their strike. They knew that all farmworkers needed to work together to win the strike. They needed unity. The workers in the National Farm Workers Association voted to join them on strike. Soon they joined together into one union and called it the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. Cesar Chavez became the first president, and Dolores and Larry became vice presidents.
The strike was very successful. People stayed out of the fields and went to picket lines, shouting “¡Viva la huelga!” - “Long live the strike!” But the growers brought people from other areas to take their jobs. They were called strikebreakers.
Dolores was one of the first women leaders of a labor union. Many people thought women couldn’t be leaders, but Dolores didn’t listen to them. The more she spoke out for justice, the stronger she became and the stronger people around her became. Other women would look at Dolores and realize they could speak out too.
The farmworker strikers decided they had to try something different. They would boycott grapes! Strikers went to cities all across the country to ask people to not eat grapes and to boycott stores that sold grapes. If the growers couldn’t make money selling grapes they would agree to farmworkers’ demands for more pay and better treatment.

Dolores went to New York and taught the strikers how to explain the farmworkers’ strike to people who lived far away from the California fields. She taught the strikers and other volunteers to picket stores and spread the word of the boycott. She showed them how they could be powerful together. Dolores led the grape boycott all across the country. More than 17 million people stopped eating grapes to support justice for farmworkers.
In 1970, they won! Dolores Huerta negotiated the contracts with the growers. Contracts were agreements that promised that workers would have their rights respected. Contracts were signed with the Delano grape growers on July 27, 1970.

They won pay raises, rest breaks, drinking water, toilets in the fields and protections from pesticides. Pesticides are poisons sprayed on the fields to kill the insects that eat the plants. These poisons also made the farmworkers ill. They also won a medical plan so they could visit the doctor when they were ill.
That same year, workers in vegetable and strawberry fields went out on strike for union contracts. They worked bent over all day cutting lettuce and picking strawberries, which hurt their backs. They, too, wanted a union. They traveled to cities around the country, asking people to boycott.

In faraway New York, Dolores Huerta trained volunteers to picket stores and explain to other people about the boycott. Once again, people wanted to help. They showed solidarity and stopped eating lettuce.

Bottom photo: Boycotter Wendy Greenfield leaflets about the boycott outside New York University. Later she became a bilingual teacher.
In 1972, the state of Arizona passed a law that said farmworkers would go to jail if they went on strike or boycotted. Dolores and Cesar went to Arizona to show their support for farmworkers. Cesar fasted for 24 days. Some supporters said, “You can’t organize in Arizona.” “No se puede” they said. “It can’t be done”.

Dolores looked at them and said, “¡Sí se puede!” – “Yes, it CAN be done. They passed a law that won’t let us organize? We’ll find a way to change the law! Let’s register people to vote so we get better representatives who will change this bad law!”

“¡Sí se puede!”
In 1973, the first grape contracts ended. The growers refused to sign new contracts with the United Farmworkers and the workers went out on strike once again. Thousands of strikers were arrested because the growers got injunctions - orders from the court - that said they couldn’t picket. Hundreds of people were beaten and two strikers lost their lives. Juan De la Cruz was killed by a labor contractor and Nagi Daifallah was killed by a deputy sheriff.

Once again, strikers went to cities across the country asking for support. Once again, Dolores was in charge of the boycott. “¡Sí se puede!” she shouted, and everyone responded, “¡Sí se puede!”
Dolores was in a relationship with Richard Chavez, Cesar’s brother. Richard gave up his work as a carpenter to join the struggle with the UFW. He and Dolores were partners in the union and at home. They had four children.

Photo: Their children Juanita, Maria Elena, Ricky. The youngest child, Camila, is now the Executive Director of the Dolores Huerta Foundation.
Dolores had eleven children. Just as Dolores has sacrificed a lot in her life, so have her children. They didn’t always have their mother near them. They didn’t have new clothes or new toys. Everyone who worked for the farmworkers were volunteers. They only received $10 a week, but the union took care of them.

They *DID* have special gifts in their lives. They had a mother who loved them. They had a mother who cared about making a better life for people everywhere. She taught them to be strong and independent and to stand up for what’s right. They traveled to other parts of the country and met more good people who became good friends. They marched, passed out leaflets, joined picket lines and went to meetings where they learned about other people’s struggles. They grew up to share their mother’s passion of working for justice.
Over the years, Dolores worked to get laws passed that would help poor people and immigrants. In 1959, she worked on a law that would allow non-citizens in California to receive public assistance, money that people need to survive hard times.

In 1975, she worked to pass the Agricultural Relations Act which gave farmworkers in California the right to have elections to have a union represent them. In 1982, a law was passed that the growers had to have toilets in the fields for farmworkers in the whole United States. In 1986, she went back to Washington to support a law that would give more rights to immigrants.

Lawmakers would listen to her, because they knew she spoke for the people. She was an organizer!
In 1988, Dolores was at a demonstration against pesticides in San Francisco, California. Suddenly the police charged against the protesters with no warning, hitting many, including Dolores, with their wooden batons. When she arrived at the hospital, she was near death. Her family and close friends came to be at her side and give her strength and love. Cesar Chavez also visited her. He was still weak because he had just finished a 25 day water-only fast against pesticides. Dolores survived to continue her work for justice.
Dolores inspired people all over the United States and around the world. She began to receive many awards and was inducted into the Women’s Hall of Fame.

In 2002, she decided to leave the United Farm Workers to continue organizing in the community. Later that year she received the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship. It came with $100,000 that she could use for whatever she wanted. And what did she want? A new organization to empower and teach people to make change in their communities!
In 2003, Dolores started the Dolores Huerta Foundation. She trained organizers to meet with people in their homes so they could talk about how to fix the needs of their communities. In Gilroy, California the people who had met in many different house meetings came together for the first time. They listened to Dolores tell them they had the power to make change.
They formed committees and made plans to fix the problems and volunteered to do the work. They learned by doing and became leaders in their communities.
The Dolores Huerta Foundation continues to have house meetings for neighbors to discuss problems and solutions and to make action plans. The people of “Vecinos Unidos” (Neighbors United) have made real changes in their neighborhoods by working together.

They organized to get dirt roads paved in their towns.
Vecinos got money from the city of Woodlake for a park - and money from the county for a swimming pool in Lamont.
They worked for a school gym in the town of Weedpatch because the air was so polluted the children could not go outside to play. Vecinos Unidos talked to many voters so they would approve money for the gym. They won! People learned they had the power to make change together. They were “empowered”.
In 2012, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award given to a civilian in the United States. He said, “She fought to give more people a seat at the table.” He remembered that she said, “Don’t wait to be invited. Step in there.”
In 2018, the state of California passed a law proclaiming every April 10th as “Dolores Huerta Day” so that school children learn about how Dolores brought people together so they could fix problems in a nonviolent way to improve their lives and communities.

Dolores said, “We need to continue organizing to empower communities so that they can fight for fair representation, voting rights, and an equitable education. This is how we are going to change the future for human rights and a fair and just society for all.”
Dolores Huerta continues as president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, training people to organize, grow strong and make change in their communities.
People from around the entire country invite Dolores to speak wherever people struggle for justice - at meetings, picket lines, and marches. When people are looking at difficult situations they need to overcome, she asks them, “Who has the power?” They respond: “We have the power!”

“¿Se puede?” “Can we do it?” “¡Sí se puede!” (This means “Yes we can!” and “Yes I can!”)
If you see a problem in your school or community and everyone says there’s no way to fix it, what will you say?

¡Sí se puede!
**Vocabulary Words**

**election**: people vote to decide on who will represent them or what new laws will pass

**empower**: give power to others or help them realize they have power

**representative**: people who are elected to act for others

**farmworker**: a person who works in the fields to plant, care for and pick the plants that we eat

**organization**: a group of people that join together to teach, help and protect each other

**union**: an organization of workers that fights for workers’ salaries and rights

**strike**: workers refuse to work until they are given a written agreement called a contract with salary increases and other protections

**activist**: a person who speaks out and is involved in activities such as meetings, marches or elections with the aim of making change

**unity**: work together for a common cause.