

2024-2025 César E. Chávez & Dolores Huerta Education Awards Program
Written Essay Recipients

Grade Level: 3-4

Region: 3

Student: Mia Perez

Teacher: Josephine Noyola

Chapter: Oxnard Educ's Assn

The Power of Paper and Pencil

I never imagined that Cesar Chavez was once a shy boy. A man who led thousands, who fought injustice with words instead of fists, how could someone like him have struggled to speak up? Like me, he once found it difficult to raise his voice in class. Through self-determination, unity, and education, he built a movement that changed lives.

That's why I chose to give voice to a story about a girl who shared his beliefs. A girl who knew that education was the key to freedom. A girl who, despite all odds, stood strong, just as Chavez did for farmworkers, believing in the power of knowledge, innovation, and unity to shape a better future.

She was born in El Salvador, where dreams were fragile but hope never faded. Her mother had left for America in search of a better life, and for ten long years, she waited, aching for the day they would be together again. Then, at last, the journey began.

For ten days, she walked endless roads, crossed rivers, and clung to the side of trains, exhaustion pressing into her bones. At the border, she was just a child, yet she had to prove who she was and why she belonged. She fought forward. And finally, she was in her mother's arms again.

Nineteen years later, that little girl, my mother, Marta Elias Perez, stood in a room, tears streaming down her face, clutching the paper that declared her a U.S. citizen in October of 2024. It was more than a certificate; it was proof of everything she had endured. Cesar Chavez taught us that our voices matter. My mother taught me the same. And now, I write, for her, for us, so the world will never forget her story. *Si se pudo.*

Note:

Familia – family

Amor-Love

Si se Pudo - Yes she could

Grade Level: 5-6

Region: 3

Student: Carlos Fernandez-Aguilar

Teacher: Claudia Andrade

Chapter: Oxnard Educ's Assn

The Strong Women Who Raise Me

Not all heroes wear capes, some wear work uniforms and wake up before the sun rises. My mother, grandmother, and auntie are the strongest women I know. The women that are raising me are just as important as the leaders we read about in history books. For example, a woman such as Dolores Huerta who fought strongly for a cause. They have taught me, not with words, but with the way they live their lives. They teach me what it means to work hard, to sacrifice, and to love.

Every morning, while most of the world is still asleep, my mother and grandmother wake up at 2 a.m. They quietly get ready, slipping out the door before the sky even begins to change colors. By 3 a.m., they are at work, standing side by side, pushing through exhaustion because they know their efforts keep our family moving forward. In my family, teamwork is not just important, it is survival. Just like Dolores Huerta fought alongside others to create a better future for farmworkers, my family stands together, lifting each other up, making sure no one carries the weight alone.

My mother is a single mom. She works two jobs, yet she still finds the time to be there for me. After working all day, she goes to her second job, helping children with behavior issues reach their goals. She doesn't just tell me to be kind and hardworking, she shows me every day. She gives every part of herself to others, and even when she is exhausted, she still manages to ask me about my day, to remind me that she loves me, and to encourage me to always do my best.

My grandmother and auntie are no different. When my mother is working late, they step in. They help me with my homework, cook my favorite meals, and remind me that I am never alone. They have dedicated their lives to making sure I have every opportunity to succeed. Their love is the reason I push myself to get good grades. I don't just want to succeed for me, I want to succeed for them. I want to make their sacrifices worth it.

Dolores Huerta once said, *"Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world."* My family may not be famous activists, but they are changing my world every single day. They teach me that education is my path to a better future, that hard work and determination can take me anywhere, and that love is the greatest gift a person can have.

I hope that one day, I can be half as strong as the women who raised me. I hope I can make them proud. And I hope the world never forgets that real heroes don't always make headlines sometimes, they just wake up at 2 a.m. and go to work.

Grade Level: 7-8

Region: 4

Student: Maritza Soto

Teacher: Jose Melo

Chapter: Valley Center-Pauma Tchrs Assn

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta are two inspirational leaders that promoted change. I admire their commitment to help marginalized groups and the fact that they used their voice to shed light on the many injustices agricultural workers faced in the USA. Chavez and Huerta embodied many principles that allowed them to inspire future generations including mine. Two principles that speak to me and guide my decision making are the power of education and collaboration.

Chavez once said, "The end of all education should surely be service to others." His words speak to me because I strive to use my education to help others. I value my education because my parents have instilled in me an appreciation for learning. My parents work under the hot sun exhausting themselves and sacrificing their own dreams because they never received the opportunity to attend school. Their hard work motivates me to do well in school. As a middle school student, I take advantage of every educational opportunity that comes my way because I understand the decisions I make today will shape my future. I am part of my school's dual language program where I learn material in two languages, English and Spanish. Learning two languages is important because being bilingual is a super power that I use to help others and honor my Mexican heritage. In the future I aspire to become a veterinarian because I enjoy taking care of animals and believe they deserve proper care. I understand that being a bilingual veterinarian will open more doors and allow me to interact with more clients, including those who do not speak English fluently. My parents remind me that education is a gift that no one can take away from me and it is a gift I deeply value. Chavez and Huerta promoted education because they understood that when people receive an education it benefits society.

A second principle I value is collaboration because great things are accomplished when people work together. One way I collaborate with others is through my involvement in my church's youth group. My youth group is made up of teenagers from different backgrounds. We collaborate and find ways to uplift our church and community. For example, we participate in community clean-up events and participate in activities to strengthen our faith. It makes me proud to be part of a group that works together to promote positivity and change within our parish and community. Equally important, my involvement in my school's advanced jazz band allows me to further hone my collaboration skills. In band, my classmates and I collaborate and support each other because we want to see each other succeed. Our ability to collaborate allows us to create music that we can share with others. For instance, as a band we organize free concerts

for community members including a Veterans Day Concert where we celebrate USA veterans. These concerts bring happiness and hope to those that attend. Dolores Huerta once said, "When a group of people get together, it's collective power. You know that you're doing it for the good." I agree with Huerta because I have seen first hand, through my involvement in my youth group and band class, that if we unite as a team we can lift each other up in ways we cannot on our own.

In conclusion, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta are two leaders that remind me that everyone has the power to promote change. I know that I am taking steps to help my community and inspire others.

Name: Maritza Soto
Word Count: 600

Grade Level: 9-12

Region: 3

Student: Bryant Garcia-Aquino

Teacher: Miguel Escobar

Chapter: Montebello Tchrs Assn

The Continued Fight For Civil Rights

Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Nevada, Michigan.. .! vividly remember nervously checking the vote count of each of these swing states on the night of the 2024 election. It was still a hopeful time at school that day, after all, none of us believed the former TV star spewing about immigrants eating cats and dogs was possibly going to win. It was about 7 pm when my hope slowly started to dwindle. Throughout the course of the next 3 hours, no nervous fiddling was going to make that sinking feeling feel better because it was evident that Trump was going to win. Going to school the next day felt surreal, it felt as though even in the loudest classrooms you could hear a needle drop. Rightfully so in a school with over a 90% Latino population and the promises made of "mass deportations on day one." The past years have painted immigrants as "criminals," the ones who built this country are demonized and treated as subhuman, but this isn't new, rather just a repeat of history.

The mistreatment of immigrants is not a new development; it's a development that's never left. Ceaser Chavez was a Mexican-American, the son of immigrants who fled to the United States, becoming migrant farmworkers. So Ceaser Chavez first hand saw the unjust working conditions the farming industry gave to their immigrant farm workers, where it was common for them to lack essentials such as toilets and free access to water. This is where we see Ceaser Chavez make his strides in fighting for the basic human rights of farmworkers through means of protests and strikes. With the combined effort of the farmworkers of America, Chavez was able to dedicate his life to ensuring the fair treatment of farmworkers in the form of pay and working conditions. Ceaser Chavez was a man of great courage and morals, who was passionate about the civil issues plaguing society, specifically in the sectors of minority groups. His efforts had great effects and set precedents to *come*, but the work is far from over. To this day, some of the issues that Ceaser Chavez fought against still exist not just in agriculture, but in the fight to ensure the rights of immigrants, who simply came to this country searching for better opportunities. Despite these continuing issues, Caesar Chavez inspired a generation of people to

continue his legacy of activism, myself included. Seeing what an effect one man can have on a movement to ensure basic human rights for people who otherwise wouldn't be able to advocate for themselves truly inspires me. Especially seeing how it relates to today, the actions of Caesar Chavez inspire me to speak out and use the opportunities I've been given to be that voice.

I come from a family of immigrants, I live in a community with a large immigrant population, and one thing I can confidently say is that, Immigrants aren't the criminals people set them out to be. I for one can't stand having to see people I care about scared for their future here in this country. I am tired of people I care about worrying for their parents when they take too long going to the grocery store. We learn that this was never an immigration issue but rather a human rights issue. Like Cesar Chavez before, and a host of other activists, we don't ask for special treatment, we simply ask for the bare minimum, to be treated like equals with dignity, empathy, and respect. My parents' goals were to provide a better life for me and my siblings than the life they had in Mexico. I hope I can take full advantage of my opportunities here, while also being able to inherit that core value that brought my parents here to begin with, selflessness. I want to move forward in life not just for the sake of myself but the sake of others, much like how Cesar Chavez did. Pressing Issues like what we're seeing today has inspired me to take up a new path, a path where I can make a difference for people. Right now, I like to volunteer around my city through a school club I'm a part of, and one day I hope to go into law & political science so that one day I can become a voice to speak for those who aren't able to speak for themselves. I want to start by making a difference in my community because I hope to be a positive influence on those around me. I am always looking to help, to look for opportunities bigger than myself. This will not end anytime soon, I want to spend my life helping others, and pursuing that as a career path is a goal I wish to accomplish.

I like to say history is one of the most important subjects we can learn because history will always find ways to repeat itself. Caesar Chavez was an incredibly important figure, especially to farmers and the Latino community, we should celebrate his achievements while also learning from them. It is there where we can find the answers to problems we face in today's times to ensure Human and Civil rights for all. As of right now, times are very fearful for a lot of people, but we can ensure that we can get through this together because we have a voice. We hold the power to ensure the futures of the next generation, a generation who will be heard, where the term "Si se puede" will ring in their ears as they hold their picket signs.

(Word Count: 931)

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Grade Level: 9-12

Region: 3

Student: Arely S. Dominguez

Teacher: Charlene Fried

Chapter: Baldwin Park Educ Assn

Si, se puede

When I came to live in my new country, the United States, and start at my new school, Sierra Vista High School, I was excited. I always dreamed of coming here to live and share my culture and traditions with the people here while I learned about theirs. I started school and right away, I felt welcomed and respected. I did well in my classes. I became active in our Bilingual IDEAS Club, sports, and music. I loved my classes and excelled academically. I felt at home and part of a warm and nurturing family. My friends, too, were doing well. Together, we not only formed a family; we also found ways to reach out to others and form a community that worked relentlessly to serve and support each other and our entire school community. Our passion drove us to work together and humbly support each other.

I have only been here for one year and five months. I came here with a dream, with the idea of getting to know a new world, meeting new people, and exploring new ideas. I came here to study and find ways to pursue my dreams while always being there to help guide others on their journeys, too. I felt fortunate to have come here well educated in Spanish and content knowledge. I came here excited to learn English while also continuing to develop my Spanish. I came here with the passion and energy to accomplish my dreams, and I knew I could do it.

Everything suddenly changed after the recent election results, and the new President. I felt my own passion leaving me and I felt fear and loneliness. I noticed that my classmates who were immigrants were feeling the same way. It was as if our passion for life froze, and we suddenly became overwhelmed with fear. Those of us who are undocumented immigrants withdrew and our passion for school, service, and giving began to hide deep inside our souls.

When I came here, I was an exemplary student, and now, since this new election, my grades have dropped, as have the grades of many of my friends. We are no longer part of a united group of students working together to make our school, community, and country a safe and welcoming place for all. We all live in fear. We are afraid to be ourselves. We are afraid to speak. We think of our parents who are here without papers. Daily, our fear grows.

The new election and the new change of government have been a case of controversy and terror in this country, especially for people like me who have fought and done everything both to excel and empower others. I see the discrimination and contempt for the immigrants. I know that the majority of farm workers are immigrants, as well as those who work in factories and do heavy-duty work. They work so hard to achieve their dreams and raise their families. How could this dream, this passion, all disappear so fast?

Thankfully, I began to remember the words and work of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, the two brave people who fought for the rights of the farm workers who harvest our fruits and vegetables. I remember how I used Dolores Huerta's words, *Si se puede*, when I was living in Mexico. I remember encouraging my classmates with the strength of her words. I

remember reading how Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta fought for the rights of the farmworkers. I know that he walked from Los Angeles to Sacramento to fight and negotiate for them (Mayra Perry, LMU).

As I look around at my friends, and especially those who are immigrants just like I am, I am beginning to regain my passion to serve others. I am intelligent. I have a voice. I am strong. I have just made a decision. Like Cesar Chavez, I will begin by walking the length of my school and talking to my classmates about the injustices that are taking place. I will become the voice of the voiceless. I will lead them into taking action right here on our campus and believing in themselves. And then, after I graduate and start the university, I will dedicate my life to fighting for all the people, and especially the immigrants, who have given so much to this country and its people. I will become that voice while Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta stand beside me to give me the hope and encouragement I will need to serve others. Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta bravely fought for the rights of the farmworkers who have always been mostly immigrants. Cesar Chavez bravely said, "We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community" (medasf.org). I want to be one of the ones to carry on their work.

My teacher just drove up Highway 99 to present a workshop to teachers in Modesto. She presented at the META Conference. Upon returning to our classroom, she told us that all the teachers' students were the children of farm workers, and all of them were so worried about what will happen with this new administration. She told us that she did not see anyone working on the farms. She saw help wanted signs posted on the farms' gates. Her heart sank as she drove past all the beautiful farms without people working on them. Were they all afraid? Were they hiding in fear? As she told us about her trip, I thought of Cesar Chavez's words, "The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people" (medasf.org). Cesar Chavez bravely fought to help his people, and all people. He bravely fought for unionization so that together, positive change would take place.

We are the students, and now, we are worried and afraid. We are asking ourselves: What is the American dream? Does it really exist? Are we living with the same fear the farm workers experienced? My teacher just announced the Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project that will take place in Sacramento in July. When she first told us about it and asked us if we would like to apply, I became overwhelmed with fear. What if we get caught? What if they deport us? But then, I thought of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and everything they have done, and I raised my hand with confidence and said I would like to apply. Here again, I will travel in their footsteps, and will carry Dolores Huerta's words with me, "*Si se puede*" (medasf.org). We can do it, together.

Grade Level: 9-12

Region: 1

Student: Pia Ferus-Comelo

Teacher: Pamela Lim-McAlister

Chapter: Albany Tchrs Assn

Si, SE PUEDE: CESAR CHAVEZ, DOLORES HUERTA, AND ME

We all know the saying, "Si, se puede!" However, not all of us know its history and significance. Coined by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, the rallying cry united farm workers in a fight for their rights. "Si, se puede!" acted as a beacon of hope amidst the frustration of the workers, who were tired of challenging a society that was biased against them. It served as a message: it may seem hard, but it can be done if we work together. Chavez and Huerta stressed the importance of collective action because they realized that synergy is needed for positive outcomes. They also knew that it would take sharing new ideas to achieve their goal of changing the status quo. Similarly, I channel their principles of collaboration and education into my Communities.

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta spearheaded the farm workers' movement by coordinating and getting everyone involved. Huerta recognized that, because the whole family worked in the fields, the whole family should be protesting in the fields. Chavez spent his life organizing farm workers as a farm worker himself to demand social and economic justice. Both established the United Farm Workers union to raise their voices. In Peer Help, a peer education program at my high school, teamwork is necessary to develop and present our curriculum about stigmatized topics like mental and sexual health. We use our diverse, individual perspectives to build upon each others' ideas and use each others' strengths to ensure success. During presentations, for example, we work as a group to monitor students' body language and interjections. We all have our eyes on the classroom, ready to step in if we spot a problem so that the speaker has our full support. In the classroom, we are one force. I understand that the bigger the group, the bigger the impact. While Chavez and Huerta brought together farm workers, I bring together high schoolers.

When Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta mobilized the farm workers, they did so by making the workers understand why they needed to be united. Huerta taught low-paid immigrants about their rights, thereby instilling a sense of their collective power and confidence. Chavez established two farm worker radio stations so that they could learn in their own language. Likewise, as a Peer Helper, I know how much power knowledge holds. By presenting about regulation techniques and birth control, I equip my fellow almost-adults with the tools to lead healthy, happy lives. Furthermore, Peer Help was founded on the principle that

high school problems can be better prevented or resolved by high schoolers, rather than adults. As one of eight in Peer Help Leadership, I develop the curriculum that we present to our classrooms, meaning that the content is made by teens for teens. Peer-to-peer education, like student-to-student or worker-to-worker, is the most effective in redressing the problems that such groups face. Building leadership and nurturing individuals has long-lasting results.

In regards to both collaboration and education, continuity is the foundation of change. Huerta engaged with the farm workers' and the feminist movements, starting in high school and continuing past her nineties. Chavez led farm workers as a farm worker himself, remaining dedicated to nonviolence. This unbroken record of perseverance and activism built trust and credibility. In Peer Help, we combat the rise of depression, anxiety, hate speech, and misinformation by routinely presenting to 7th and 9th graders. As we target these two groups every year, we draw youth into a consistent journey of learning to self-regulate at key points in their development. As a group, we have the opportunity to be more effective and create change by working with youth over time. I pour my time and effort into Peer Help, and combined with each Peer Helper's contributions, we advance our commitment to our mission. Another example of how I practice this is when I serve breakfast to local unhoused people. In collaboration with the other volunteers, I help provide basic needs to those who have been abandoned by society. Learning the names and preferences of both the servers and the unhoused helps me form deeper connections with them. This is the basis of organizing for change. Together, our community takes care of one another.

As the government shifts toward the far-right, it is more important than ever to remember Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta's legacy. A lot of farm workers-those who Chavez and Huerta empowered, those who grow the country's food-are being attacked and communities are torn apart and deported. It seems difficult to resist oppression, but like they patiently reminded us, we can do it. When the world told them that farm workers weren't important, they pushed back. When the world tells us that we aren't important, we push back. A true democracy needs collaboration and education. It was Chavez's and Huerta's mission to uphold the dignity and humanity of low-paid workers and to demand acknowledgement and respect from the government. Their impact didn't happen overnight. It took steps-starting small, then growing bigger. I feel it is my duty to follow in their footsteps-one step after another, adding to what they fought for. ¡Si, se puede!

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Grade Level: 9-12

Region: 3

Student: Maya Roman

Teacher: Jae W. Shin Perez

Chapter: Whittier Sec Educ Assn

Cesar Chavez & Dolores Huerta Memorial Scholarship Entry

The road to success is not a clear path, rather it is one lined with obstacles that tests the resilience, determination, and faith of an individual. It is out of the challenges in life that leaders emerge, who serve as beacons of hope for marginalized communities in American society. Civil rights activists Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta are examples of such leaders that have given a voice to Mexican-American farm workers to improve their working conditions, treatment, and quality of life. Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta are exemplary leaders whose legacy has inspired my life and guided my understanding of the power of unionization, empowerment of the disenfranchised, and service to others.

One of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta greatest accomplishments was the unionization of California farm workers. Through the use of various inspiring speeches and peaceful protests, both Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta inspired a large population of farmworkers to take a stand on the economic and social injustice their employers placed upon them. The collective voices of the farm workers reached powerful farm owners at a much quicker rate than if the farmer workers would have approached creating change on their own. It was due to this unionization that the farm workers were able to successfully achieve economic and social justice in their work place. It is not enough to just read about unionization to understand its effects, one must also live through it. Personally, when I was in the third grade I joined my mother and a large group of Montebello School District teachers, parents and students as they protested against mass district layoffs. The layoffs would not only negatively affect all fired teachers, it also would have affected the students. With less teachers in the classroom due to layoffs, there would be larger class sizes limiting the attention placed on each individual student. The protest consisted of peaceful marches and rallies in front of the Montebello School District Office. Almost each and every teacher carried a sign, cowbell, or megaphone, on them in order to attract attention to their cause. The electrifying passion coursing through each and every teacher present at the protests was contagious, and I eventually began to protest as powerfully as they had. Eventually, the teachers garnered enough attention from various news outlets to have District officials rethink their decision to layoff teachers. Through this related experience with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, I have learned the power behind collective voices and unionization. When people gather

together for a common cause they are able to obtain the attention of key individuals who can reverse course on decisions that have lasting effects on communities they serve.

Although many tend to focus on Cesar Chavez and his actions toward the fight for equal rights, had it not been for the empowerment Dolores Huerta placed upon farmworkers the labor movement would not have been as successful. Dolores Huerta began her journey as a civil rights activist before Cesar Chavez. During her upbringing many authoritative figures looked down upon Dolores Huerta's intelligence simply because she was a Hispanic woman. It was this discrimination which inspired Dolores Huerta to begin her journey as a civil rights activist, where she protested for equality for the entire Hispanic community. Through her partnership with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta implemented her immense experience of advocating for the disenfranchised, inspiring farmworkers to join her in various boycotts and protests. Much like Dolores Huerta became capable of empowering groups towards creating change, I took a stand when the removal of the girls tennis team at my current high school was announced.

I had first joined my high school tennis team during freshman year, and it became much more than a sport to me, it became my safe space. I met so many wonderful young women through this sport that it provided me with a supportive community. However, the summer before the commencement of my senior year, I received an email stating that my school was going to cut the tennis program. I was disappointed, a feeling commonly shared by many of the girls on the team. The decision was so definitive that my teammates did not know what we could do to change the school's decision. I decided that I needed to take action, so I sent an email to our principal. I pointed out the hypocrisy in the fact that the school administration did not consider girls tennis a priority in maintaining, as opposed to the opulent advertisement and attention given to the boys football team. The injustice was clear and the discrimination was evident as boys sports generate income for the school. I shared what I did with my teammates and they felt encouraged to speak out against losing our sport. By the first month of school, our tennis program had been approved and we now had our season back. Through this experience, I have learned through our related experience that all it takes is one voice to inspire many others to speak out against injustice. Although there are people in power who may overlook the individuals battling against an issue, this does not mean one must stop their fight.

Through using their individual strengths both Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta were able to provide a service toward the farm-working community regarding fair treatment at work. Cesar Chavez used his skills of bringing people closer together in order to form the powerful union of farm workers that would participate in the numerous protests and boycotts of the labor

movement. Dolores Huerta used her background in social activism to plan out successful campaigns that drew the attention of farm owners into the unjust treatment of their workers. Both their hard work resulted in the success of the labor movement. When it comes to using teamwork in order to benefit others, I personally implement this through all actions I take as the PTSA president. As the only student president in the entire Whittier City School District, I make it my mission to work together with my parent and teacher colleagues to be the voice of the student population at my high school. This collaboration allows for numerous benefits for not just the student population but the parent and teacher one as well. I am able to relate to the work both Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta accomplished together as I now know that all their hard work was well worth it if the people they are representing benefit at the end of the day.

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Grade Level: Higher Ed
Region: 2
Student: Daniela Romo
Teacher: Sarah Seekatz
Chapter: San Joaquin Delta College Tchrs Assn

The first speech I ever willingly gave was in front of two hundred and fifty people, at a rancher's memorial service in Lodi, California.

I was eighteen years old having just quit my job as a chairside dental assistant. In high school, I enrolled in a trade program to help my family, and upon graduating took the first job I could land. My boss was verbally abusive, to the point I became severely depressed and stopped eating. In nine months, I lost sixty pounds. My brain was still foggy, and I felt numb to everything. The night before the memorial service, my dad had asked me to write and give a speech on his behalf, since he didn't speak English, and felt that others would make fun of him if he attempted to. Feeling self-conscious about my own speaking, I told him I wouldn't write a speech. Regardless, I agreed to accompany him to help translate.

The rancher, Dean, had grown cherries in the central valley-my family had picked and gathered workers for him for nearly twenty years. My dad was his foreman. Between my dad and every rancher, I was his interpreter. English was my superpower. Beginning the age of nine, I began to write and submit logs for how many cherries were picked weekly by 60+ workers. Both of my parents had only gone to school until the second grade and had difficulty writing. Despite this, Dean never took advantage of us. He paid us the minimum wage. This is what made him better than others.

When my family had first arrived from Mexico, we crossed with the help of a rancher who let us rent a single room trailer home on his apple orchard in exchange for maintaining his fields. We called him Eli. Under him, my family worked twelve-hour days, where Eli purposely only paid us enough to afford to live in the trailer home. My older brother and I would follow to the fields, and once my younger siblings were born, I began to keep house. My mother often cleaned Eli's home, working twenty hours per week and earning one hundred dollars a month, at a time when the minimum wage was fourteen dollars per hour. When she asked for higher pay, she was immediately turned down. Our turning point came when my mother had a miscarriage due to overwork, and we were kicked off the property because she hadn't healed fast enough to continue working. My parents being undocumented immigrants, we left quietly, and without a word. We felt that nothing could be done to us that was more criminal than our own existence in this country.

At Dean's memorial service, I watched people give speeches about how great a baseball coach he was, making no reference to how he farmed cherries, how he treated his workers, how he had viewed us as humans, not mules. And when I turned to my father, he held my arm, and I realized it was the first time I had ever seen him cry. He hadn't cried at the death of his brother, or sister-but for a rancher who had done nothing more than treat us like people.

In that moment, I tore out of his grip and walked up to the podium. In a trembling voice, I gave a speech about how Dean had always been respectful to migrant farm workers despite differences in language, culture, and class. When it was finished, the whole crowd stood and applauded. At the podium, I cried, too. I cried because only my dad was crying in the crowd. I cried because no one's words but mine could provide him closure. I cried because respect is the bare minimum. And in that moment, I realized my usefulness never stemmed from the fact I knew English. My power was in bringing attention to those who could never imagine speaking up for themselves.

The disregard for farmworker's lives remains constant to this day. Stories of people's health being negatively impacted by the fields are not uncommon. A couple of years ago, an uncle of mine died of heatstroke when working in the fields past the legal temperature limit for an extended period of time. A year later, another uncle fell off a ladder while picking oranges in Orange County, only to die because the ambulance took over half an hour to find him in the fields. In addition to disregard for farmworkers, abuse and exploitation are widespread. In the central valley, it is easy to find farmworker contractors who only pay eighty dollars a day for eight hours of work. Many of these contractors are never reported, because farmworkers fear being deported more than they fear being exploited. Ranchers depend on contractors because they are cheap, and able to communicate with workers. And even when contractors do pay a fair salary, the abuse doesn't end there. Sometimes, it's the smaller actions that make just as much of an impact-like the way contractors will move portable toilets farther away to discourage workers from using the bathroom and moving them closer when someone comes by to inspect.

I continue to live in a neighborhood of undocumented farmworkers. Until now, I have never seen this level of fear within my community. The men of my neighborhood no longer play loud music. The women of my neighborhood have torn down their gardens, under the logic that it is dangerous to garner attention. When existing is dangerous, speaking is deadly.

Today, I continue to give speeches, as part of the debate team, the student senate, and other organizations. In May, I am graduating with four associate's degrees, all having to do with social justice and the law, from the same community college Dolores Huerta attended. My work is connected to that of Chavez and Huerta in that I also hope to create protections for farmworkers within the law by using my voice to speak up for my community. My goal is to create legislation that creates a faster process for undocumented immigrants to attain citizenship, and to protect farmworkers from exploitation and abuses by contractors to help my community come closer to achieving social justice. I am transferring to a four-year university in the fall and majoring in Political Science to continue pursuing this goal. My first speech is one of many-because it will always be my responsibility to speak up for those who fear speaking up for themselves.