

# Mourning Wendy Goepel Brooks, one of the UFW's first full-time volunteers at the dawn of the 1965 Delano grape strike

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It was with sadness that we learned of the passing on March 26 of Wendy Goepel Brooks, who played key roles in the momentous early events of the Delano grape strike as one of the first full-time volunteers with what became the United Farm Workers.

Wendy, 84, who passed away from cancer, was born in Hackensack, New Jersey in 1939. After two years at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, Wendy headed west in 1958 to serve with the California Migrant Ministry, where she soon met then-community organizer Cesar Chavez. She lived in a farm labor camp in Wasco while providing daily Bible study and daycare for 100 migrant children. Following the crops with a migrant family while picking grapes, Wendy “held on tightly to the passion I had discovered for the migrant workers.”

At U.C. Berkeley, where she earned a master’s degree, she formed the Citizens for Farm Labor support group. By 1963, she became Cesar Chavez’s “eager student” while driving him from place to place as he organized the union. She would end up at Cesar’s house on Kensington Street in Delano, sitting at a red Formica kitchen table while Helen prepared tortillas and spending time with Dolores Huerta, Fred Ross and Cesar’s brother, Richard Chavez. “There was an energy there that I hadn’t ever seen in the workplace,” she recalled. “But then this wasn’t work; it was life.”

Cesar invited Wendy to spend the night at his home the day before his mostly Latino union joined the strike already begun by Filipino grape pickers in September 1965. She found herself early the next morning “on an amazingly long picket line in the cold valley fog” along a rural country road east of Delano. “Suddenly, I was part of that group of freedom fighters.” That morning, Wendy quit her state job and went to work with the striking grape workers for \$5 per week, becoming one of the first full-time UFW staff members.

In the coming months, she wrote and issued news releases, spoke with reporters, was assigned by Cesar to head up an all-female picket line, picketed the houses of farm labor contractors who recruited scabs (strikebreakers), and found herself in a war zone—the increasingly bitter battleground of Delano at the dawn of the epic five-year long vineyard walkouts.

Wendy joined Cesar and Helen Chavez at spartan Sunday masses held in Delano parks with “a lovely banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe adorn[ing] the altar” and “where we would sing the haunting song ‘*De Colores*.’”

As the strike dragged into the fall months, “it got colder and colder in the early morning.” In the “bitter cold and foggy darkness” they would “jump up and down to stay warm and hollered to energize our freezing bodies.”

Forty-four picketers were arrested and jailed for saying the word “*Huelga!*”—including 11 women with a total of 76 children. “Cesar blithely asked me to take care of the 76 children while their moms were in jail,” Wendy noted.

She left the strike for Washington, D.C. in 1966 to develop rural health programs under Sargent Schriver, head of the War on Poverty. That fall, Cesar called her. Volunteer doctors and nurses came to Delano to care for strikers and their families, but he needed a clinic and asked Wendy to help raise the money.

Working with New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy and his legislative assistant, Peter Edelman, Wendy organized a fundraiser in 1967 at a swank Marin County home overlooking San Francisco Bay. She and Edelman drove Senator Kennedy and Cesar to the successful event, where Kennedy introduced her to Dr. David Brooks, who she later married.

Wendy and David Brooks began a clinic for farm workers in Woodville, Calif. Moving to Telluride, Colorado, she founded and directed the Telluride Academy, offering outdoor education for hundreds of children a year, many on scholarships. She retired in 2007.

Wendy Goepel Brooks is survived by brothers Steven and Bruce Goepel; sons Demian and Dylan Brooks, and grandchildren Julien Philip, Amelia, Theo, Elin, and Erik. She was preceded in death by her son Darius, sister Carol (Cookie) Graff, and her parents, Walter and Louise Goepel. A celebration of life is set for 4 p.m. on June 15, at the Michael D. Palm Theater, 721 W. Colorado Ave., Telluride, Colorado 81435.



*From left in the back row of this photo from the 1965 grape strike are Wendy Goepel, Luis Valdez, Cesar Chavez, a grape striker, and Donna Haber. Emilio Huerta, Dolores Huerta's son, is in the right front.*



*Wendy Goepel Brooks addressed the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the 1965-1970 Delano grape strike in 2015, representing all of the union's staff members from that era.*