

Name _____ Date _____

Cesar Chavez & Community Organizing

iSi se puede!

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Cesar Chavez was born in 1927 in Yuma, Arizona to Mexican immigrant parents. His family had a small home on a large plot of land. Chavez’s father made a deal to clear that land in exchange for forty acres next to the family’s home. The man who owned this land did not fulfill his end of the deal. He sold the land to someone else. Chavez’s father went to a lawyer for advice. The lawyer told him to borrow money to buy the land from the new owner. But because of the Great Depression, a terrible economic slump that hit during the 1930s, the family was short on money. Chavez’s father could not pay back the loan. The lawyer he had asked for help then bought the land and sold it to the original owner. The lawyer made money by cheating the Chavez family. The family lost their home and everything they owned. So they moved to California in search of a new life.

Notes

2. Chavez’s parents were migrant farm workers. They had to move around often to find work. Chavez went to almost 36 schools before the eighth grade. School was very difficult for Chavez. Many of the other students were mean to him because he came from an immigrant family. Chavez also wasn’t allowed to speak Spanish, which was the language he knew best. He dropped out of school after eighth grade. Education became more important to Chavez later in life. He said that, “The end of all education should surely be service to others.”

Notes

Before becoming a labor leader and activist, Chavez joined the navy. He also worked as a ranch hand and at a lumber yard. Eventually, he became an organizer at the Community Services Organization, a civil rights group that helped protect LatinX communities. There, he worked to make the relationships between LatinX immigrants and the communities they lived in better.

3. Cesar Chavez experienced firsthand how difficult life could be for migrant farmers. He saw that both adults and children had to work up to 15 hours a day for very little pay. They often didn't have access to clean drinking water or even bathrooms. And employers often treated workers very badly. Chavez wanted to help these mistreated workers. He dedicated his life to La Causa, which means "the cause" in Spanish. La Causa is the movement for Mexican-American farm workers. In 1962, Chavez co-founded the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta, a fellow activist. They lobbied for a minimum wage and unemployment insurance. They wanted workers to get fair pay and be protected if they lost their jobs. The organization also worked to grant laborers collective bargaining rights. By 1970, the group had almost 50,000 members. It was later renamed the United Farm Workers.

Notes

4. Chavez was inspired by the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. He admired Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent methods of protest. So Chavez showed his support for farm workers in many nonviolent ways. These included hunger strikes and marches. In 1965, the National Farm Workers Association joined Filipino-American farm workers. They had called a strike against the grape fields of Delano, California. Thousands of workers quit the fields during the harvest. These workers were from the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. In 1966, this group officially merged with the National Farm Workers Association to become the United Farm Workers. That same year, Chavez helped organize a 340 mile march from Delano to Sacramento. This march raised national awareness of the plight of grape farm workers. But simply striking and refusing to work was not enough. Companies brought in strikebreakers. Strikebreakers are workers who fill the jobs of striking workers. So Chavez called for a boycott on grapes. The boycott spread. Many people all across North America refused to buy grapes. Grape sales dropped across the US and in Canada, too. After five years, in 1970, grape growers finally agreed to let farm workers unionize. They signed union contracts. Workers got higher wages, health and welfare benefits and other protections. "¡Si se puede!" became the motto of the United Farm Workers. This means "Yes, we can!" or "It can be done!"

Notes

5. Cesar Chavez worked hard for La Causa. Because of his work, Chavez has been called one of the most inspirational leaders of the 20th century. He fought for justice and civil rights for over 30 years. Though he faced many challenges, he never gave up in his efforts. He helped raise wages and improve working conditions for thousands of farm workers. And his legacy lives on. Today, the United Farm Workers of America still works in support of Chavez's cause.

Chavez once said, "Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore."

Notes