

Thursday, September 28 Presentation to Local Community:

Who I am: My name is Jessica Govea Thorbourne and I am a professional organizer. I've always been involved in campaigns that were considered to be losers. With one or two exception, we've always won. I was born the oldest of five children to Juan Rivera Govea, a 26 year old bracero from Mexico City and Margaret de la Rosa Govea, a 19 year old first generation Chicana who had to leave school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade to work fulltime in the fields of California. My parents made their home in the "Little Okie" barrio in Bakersfield, California. <sup>my home</sup> Our county is known for its <sup>produces</sup> production of cotton, table grapes and oil. The year I was born - 1947 - farm worker children were starving in the labor camps 12 miles from my home. I became a member of the American labor force in 1951 at the age of four when I went to pick cotton. Most people used 100 lb sacks - I was too small for that, so my mother made me a 25 lb sack. I worked in the fields from then on, unless I was in school or there was nothing to be picked or I managed to get a babysitting or other <sup>town</sup> job.

When I was seven, a man came and knocked on our door. That visit - from Fred Ross, at the time working with Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation and the principle organizer of the Community Service Organization, marked an important point in the course my life has taken. CSO was founded in ELA in the late 1940's by young Chicano WWII veterans and industrial union activists who weren't prepared to continue accepting things as they were after serving on the front lines of both the war and labor organizing. They were fed up with being denied the right to register to vote, with discrimination in hiring and housing with being treated as second-class citizens. The incident that captured how bad things were and that CSO organized around was the

*Kids were finishing 8<sup>th</sup> grade & maybe 1 or 2 years of HS  
a Chicana was doing well at school she sold tickets at the movie theater & worked as a bank teller in a beauty salon.*

Sleepy Lagoon case where the police in the Hollenbeck Precinct of the LA Police Department entertained themselves on Xmas Eve by beating the hell out of a group of young Chicanos. Luis Valdez of the Teatro Campesino tells the story in his play and film "Zoot Suit". Fred came to our door, was invited into our home, and had a conversation with my parents about the conditions we lived in and did they want to do something about that. He told of how the Mexicanos and Chicanos in ELA were organizing themselves and talked about how - if folks in Bakersfield were willing to do the work, they could do the same. My parents became part of the founding group of the Bakersfield chapter and CSO because the centerpiece of our family's life both inside and outside our home. I joined Cesar and Fred and the farm worker movement when I was 18 years old. Even though I'd been part of that community I learned that FW'ers had a life expectancy of 48 years; that our infant mortality rates were 250% higher than other folks; that most of the tray grape for raisins (which I had picked) were picked by children; that farm workers since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had attempted to organize themselves and been brutally defeated. I became \_\_\_\_\_ aware of the power of agribusiness in our valley. A power that reached into every corner of what is public life: churches, schools, local government, law enforcement. 16 years in the UFW foundation of what I know about organizing. When we formed our union you got as much responsibility as you were willing to accept. I therefore ended up responsible for a lot of major pieces of the union's work that included: leading and coordinating the boycott of grapes in Canada's Toronto and Montreal for a total of five years between 1968 and 1975; serving as national director of organizing during the peak years of our growth, establishing quality cost-controlled medical care for our

*of was the era of  
Senator Joe McCarthy*  
*Dad went to a Farm  
Bureau meeting in  
one of all - they didn't  
really mean it*

members and their families in Mexico, revamping our medical plan, directing many of our major statewide voter registration and get out the vote campaigns, directing our 13 rural health clinics and leading campaigns in the Santa Maria, Imperial and Salinas Valleys when we finally got the right in 1975 to secret ballot representation elections. For sixteen years I worked - as did my fellow farm worker organizers for \$5.00 and then 15.00 a week and room and board which usually meant a hustled space in someone's attic or basement in order to save the union money. In 1977 I was elected to the UFW's national executive board - the second woman and the youngest person to be elected. That honor didn't bring me more money it just brought me more work. For the past 19 years I have dedicated myself to sharing what I have learned about organizing in a number of different areas: with community organizations throughout the Southwest and other parts of the country; with the clothing workers union and the national AFL-CIO; with coffee processors who work at the foot of El Salvador's volcanos and whose union leaders were massacred during that terrible war, with workers and students through the schools of industrial and labor relations at Rutgers in New Jersey and Cornell in New York. I presently serve as Director of Labor In House Program for Cornell. What I want to write: the lessons that I've learned about organizing - forged by the fear of the unfriendly powers that dominated my larger community, by the anger at the injustice experienced by my community and the power of the hope that came when I saw first my parents and their contemporaries - blue and brown collar workers - stand up straight and fight for improvement and change; and then the proud and brave movement that I became a part of.

*with single parent Dominican  
women in Washington  
His section of upper  
Manhattan*

So, let me tell you some of the things I believe to be the fundamentals of organizing. Things that I have seen validated over and over again with a wide range of people and communities that has included:

Farm workers all over this country - and we don't all look the same or come from the same experience

Canadian workers, church people, politicians, students.

Middle class members of NOW undertaking voter registration

Urban Chicanos

Medical providers in Mexico

Undergraduate students in New Jersey

LOver a period of 35 years

Why I want to write it: My husband Ken and I live in West Orange, NJ home of Thomas Edison and neighbor to MontclairI am reminded almost daily of the work that remains to be done; I live in West Orange, NJ. My commuter bus travels through neighboring Montclair, NJ and I do a lot of my shopping there. Montclair has become a mecca for New Yorkers seeking to raise their children in a nice environment. These are well-bred, well-educated supposedly liberal people. I look like the women who clean their houses and take care of their children. Because of this people expect me to give up my seat on the commuter bus and get in FRONT of me at the grocery store checkout line. I write it for those who are visible enough to be disrespected and invisible enough to be dismissed.

Am I angry - you bet. But just as important, I am and have always been hopeful thanks to my parents and their example, thanks to Fred and CSO, thanks to the farm workers movement and thanks to every single organizing experience that I have had.

Who I want to write it for: for those who have that yet uncovered fire in them; for the 12 and 13 year old boys and girls who come up from Mexico alone to work the garment factories of NY. For the Mexican farm workers all over this country some living so far away that years pass that they don't see their families; for the Dominican women in Washington Heights; for all those who don't have a place at the table.

*My interest is with those from whom I came*

For the workers in upstate New York, who go for years without seeing their families, choosing between a trip there or sending the travel money so that their families can eat

For the workers at garment factories in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn who are called a number, not their name

The simple, maybe obvious lessons of organizing:

That you should not do for others what they can do for themselves

That participation in as struggle or effort leads to ownership of that struggle

That we shouldn't make assumptions about people

That we shouldn't say no or set limits for other people

That organizing is about respectful relationships and finding out what we have in common that will help us work together

That organizing doesn't just happen - you have to have a plan, distribute responsibilities (with the buck stopping somewhere), measuring progress and results, training/supervising so that people can be successful and celebrating all the victories along the way

To be clear about why you exist - define your mission - and measure everything against it

That those of us in the people business will never have all the resources we need to do our work - our challenge is how to do it anyway.

*Fred Ross Axiom -  
Social anarchist*