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Grape boycott recalls memories of 1970s protests at University

By Stephen Maher

Of the Emerald

The current grape boycott and visit by Cesar Chavez is not the first time the issue has touched base at the University and in Eugene.

Sparked by the lack of a contract between farm workers and grape growers, a national boycott of non-United Farm Workers lettuce and grapes erupted in 1973. At the University the EMU's policy of buying non-UFW lettuce sparked protest activities and heated maneuverings between the administration and students.

University President Robert Clark and EMU Director Richard Reynolds insisted that the University buy both UFW and non-UFW lettuce and let students decide which one they preferred. Students countered that farm workers were living in poverty and, to buy non-union lettuce perpetuated the problem.

"President Clark's position was 'freedom of choice,'" said Bill Lutz, Clergy and Laity Concerned development director, who was a student organizer at the time. "Our position was that UFW didn't have a choice — you either worked under miserable conditions or you didn't work at all."

In response, students set up their own food stands on the EMU terrace outside the Fishbowl and urged students to boycott EMU food services.

"It was something that anyone who went into the EMU saw," said Herb Everett, a Eugene printer who was a student at the time and a volunteer with the UFW.

"It was like Saturday Market. A lot of the (present day) organizations got their financial starts there," Lutz said.

"We ended up sending the UFW a couple thousand dollars, raised people's consciousness and cost the EMU \$150,000," Lutz said.

'We ended up sending the UFW a couple thousand dollars, raised people's consciousness and cost the EMU \$150,000.'

— Bill Lutz

Everett's wife, Nancy Bray, also was involved in boycott activities and remembers all the work that went into keeping the tables going.

"People would have to get up in the middle of the night to make sandwiches and pick up juice," Bray said.

The administration countered the student move by contacting the Environmental Health Department, who consequently revoked the boycott's food license. But the student protesters continued the food sales, and no charges were ever filed by the state.

Lutz recalled one incident when a health department official visited the terrace.

"The EMU manager called the health department on us, and he came and found a few minor things. And then he went into the EMU and came out with a big list of violations," Lutz said.

Also at the forefront of the protest activities were the so-called "Lettuce Trials" of 1974.

In February of that year, 75 chanting pro-UFW demonstrators appeared at a luncheon for the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Organization in the EMU Ballroom and disrupted the featured speaker, Newsweek columnist Shana Alexander. A couple of days later, two of the protesters were cited under the Student Conduct Code for

disrupting a University event.

"The University, through the Student Conduct Board, said it was disruptive. So they tried them," Everett said.

The "Lettuce Trial" was actually a hearing before the three-member Student Court. And after seven hours the two students were acquitted.

"There were about 300 students there — the place was packed," said Michael Goldstein, a Eugene attorney who defended the students as a University law student at the hearing.

"We brought a member of the UFW executive committee to testify, which didn't please the administration at all," Everett said. "It was a big victory for the movement at the time."

The second "Lettuce Trial" occurred in May of 1974. The Student Conduct Office charged five students with "misuse of University property" for using EMU tables on the terrace. The second hearing also ended in acquittal, but this time the court condemned the administration for a "politically motivated" hearing.

In 1975, students took over the old EMU television lounge and set up a concession.

"The weather turned bad so they decided to take over the room and turn it into a boycott room," Goldstein said.

"The administration was very reluctant to throw us out because of the support from the students," Everett said.

A student referendum on the lettuce issue in 1974 revealed that 71.4 percent of the students supported the EMU boycott.

The boycott also extended to the community with Safeway stores as one of the targets.

"We had a good boycott of the stores — and had sizable rallies," Bray said. "We'd have several people, and we'd go up and say, 'We're asking you not to shop at Safeway,' and we'd tell them of other stores."

"We had a pretty good success rate at getting people to get back in their cars and leave," she added.

By 1975, the tide had turned in favor of the UFW. The California Legislature passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, giving farm workers the right to hold free elections on unionization, and the UFW began winning contracts with growers.

In Eugene the boycott efforts also wound down.

"It seemed like there was no longer a need for us to be doing what we were doing," Bray said. "I guess it was mostly the passage of the act."

"As an organizer, the farm worker movement developed a lot of the methodology used to-day and set a standard for grass-roots organizing," Lutz said.

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