**An Encounter with César Chávez**

An article from Marcus Steele, City of Mesa, Arizona about an encounter his grandfather had with Cesar Chavez.



**Jose “Joe” Hernandez, 94 years old, Phoenix, AZ**

My maternal grandfather was born in a small rural pueblita outside of Safford, Arizona called San Jose in November 1926 to parents that were fifth generation Arizonans. As was common in the time in rural Arizona, he left school when he was eleven to work the Pima cotton fields to support his family. My grandpa, Jose “Joe” Hernandez, was a jack of all trades and always found a way to make a living for his wife of over 70 years, Corina, and five kids. In 1944, at the age of 18, he entered the Army was stationed in Southeast Asia where he built roads. He also worked as a sawmill foreman, owned a general store, owned a restaurant (where my mom and dad were married), was an ordained Catholic Deacon, worked in the copper mines of Morenci, AZ, was a real estate agent, and until he was 91, owned a *multiservicios* business where he did immigration services and tax preparation for a majority Hispanic American and immigrant population in East Phoenix.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, after retiring from the Phelps-Dodge mining corporation, one of my grandpa’s jobs was as an afternoon radio show host in Solomon, Arizona. He was responsible for the content and the sponsorships, the revenues he would split with the radio station. He would play Hispanic music, read the newspaper in Spanish, and give updates on local news.

In 1983, a tenuous and wide-reaching labor strike between copper miners’ unions and the Phelps Dodge Corporation shocked Southeastern Arizona. The strike led national labor leaders to come from all over the country to support the workers unions. One of the labor rights activists was César Chávez.  Mr. Chávez gave a series of talks at local townhalls and schools in Clifton, Morenci, and Safford, Arizona.

With his tape recorder in tow, my Grandpa Joe attended one of Mr. Chávez’s public speaking engagements in Safford and sought to interview the labor rights leader. He met Mr. Chávez that night, but was unable to get an interview, however, my grandpa talked Mr. Chávez into calling into his radio program. The following day, my grandpa, sat alone in the radio studio with César Chávez on the phone and the two talked for a half hour.  The two men, only about six months apart in age, discussed (in Spanish) Chávez’s experiences supporting labor unions across the country, the rights of the miners’ ability to leverage their labor for fair working wages and working rights, and Mexican immigration.  My grandpa remembers that Mr. Chávez was a very soft-spoken man, which can be verified by interviews he has given that you can find online.  My grandpa told me recently, “He didn’t seem like a politician, he wasn’t particularly well spoken either.  But he was genuine. He just wanted to help the people in the mines and immigrants that came here to work.”

This chance encounter with two of my heroes is a reminder that it is our collective history of our families – our niñas, tios, primos, *todos* – that bring us together in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month and César Chávez Day.  We all know that our heroes are not only those with their names on schools and those we see in the news but are those that helped raised us and who we call our family.

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