



National Chavez Center Featured in *Hispanic Magazine*

The National Chavez Center is featured in an article in the October issue of *Hispanic Magazine*. The article is part of a larger series on "Heritage."

Below is the article:

A new center seeks to preserve the legacy of Cesar E. Chavez
By Katherine A. Diaz

Cesar E. Chavez's uncompromising and self-sacrificing work on behalf of farm workers has made him a true American hero to many.

Since his death in 1993, Chavez's legacy has continued on in the United Farm Workers of America and in the work of the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation. Cesar Chavez Day, March 31, is an official holiday in seven states and dozens of cities and counties throughout the nation. He also is remembered through countless parks, streets, community centers, libraries, schools, etc. that bear his name. And this April, another special place that honors his memory was opened to the public – the National Chavez Center at Nuestra Señora Reina de La Paz in California.

The center is a project of the foundation and sits on 180 acres approximately 30 miles from Bakersfield or some 10 miles northeast of Tehachapi. The location is the ideal spot for the memorial. It was here that the labor union Cesar Chavez founded was headquartered. Here he lived and worked and often strolled through the fields to meditate. And it is here that he is buried. To date, the center consists of a memorial garden and visitor center.

Members of the Chavez family and people who worked closely with him through the years played key roles in the development and design of the center, careful to make the center a reflection of the man. The memorial garden, which is his final resting place, is filled with significant icons. The grapevines and small strawberry patches recall the ties to agriculture; the rustic arbors built from recycled redwood beams reflect Chavez's environmental and conservation concerns; the stylized stone eagle design in the pavement is based on the United Farm Workers flag (with a 30-foot wingspan designed to be visible in satellite photographs from space); and the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a reminder of that image that was often seen on farm worker banners at marches.

The visitor center is housed in an early 1900s building that once served as the farm workers union headquarters. It now offers interpretive exhibits and presentations about the life and work of Cesar Chavez. His office is located here and visitors can see it as he left it, guided by and audiovisual narrative.

This audiovisual presentation is particularly touching, says his granddaughter, Teresa Chavez Delgado, who is the site coordinator for the center. She explains how her grandmother, aunts, uncles, and others close to him speak about Chavez. "People will see a husband, a 'tata', a father, through family members' eyes. It's nice to have those memories."

Delgado believes that the center is a way to share with others the values of her grandfather. "It's our duty to pass on his legacy," said Delgado. "[We want people to] be inspired."

"The center is visited by farm workers, laborers, environmentalists, Hispanics, and non-Hispanics," said Andrés F. Irlando, Esq., president of the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation. "This reflects the depth of his overall legacy."

Future phases of construction to the center will add a retreat complex, a museum, and a library. According to Irlando, "This will be a place where people can come together to learn about the man, his values, his work, his life. It will be a place to engage in programming based on his life, but based on contemporary issues."

To date, about \$3 million has gone into the development of the center. Funding has come from the state of California, grants, tours and merchandising. Funds also have been raised through private donations. Fundraising is ongoing for the additional phases of development.

Cesar Chavez was born in Arizona on March 31, 1927. When he was 10, his family became migrant farm workers after they lost their farm in the Great Depression. His years of following crops and working in the fields exposed him to the hardships and injustices faced by farm workers.

After serving two years in the U.S. Navy, Chavez married, moved to California, and settled his family in the East San Jose barrio of Sal Si Puedes. In 1952, he joined the Community Service Organization (CSO), an early Chicano/Mexican American civil rights group founded by Fred Ross, Sr., in 1949. It was with this group that Chavez honed his community activist and organizing skills.

Continued frustration and concern over the unfair treatment of farm workers, who toiled in the fields under atrocious working conditions, led Chavez to dream of creating an organization to represent farm workers' interests.

Leaving the CSO, Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association in 1962, which later evolved into the United Farm Workers of America. It is to this union and its struggles that Chavez dedicated himself, emerging as a charismatic leader who embraced the principles of nonviolence as practiced by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He led the charge against growers, and under his leadership, the union made historic achievements on behalf of workers. These include the first collective bargaining agreement between farm workers and growers; and the first union contracts that instituted rest periods, provided for clean drinking water and hand-washing facilities, resulted in protective clothing against pesticide exposure, and banned pesticide spraying while workers were in the fields. Other firsts include the first union contract that banned discrimination in employment and sexual harassment of female workers, and the first to provide for profit sharing and parental leave. In addition, the dangerous short-handled hoe, which had crippled workers in the past, was abolished.

Fearless and determined, Chavez organized peaceful strikes and boycotts to drive his point home. He inspired a remarkably broad coalition of students, trade unionists, religious groups, political leaders, and representatives from other minority groups nationwide.

One of the first efforts of the union that called attention to the struggle of the workers to people unfamiliar with field conditions, and that drew national attention to Chavez and his cause, was the 1967 boycott of California table grapes. Between 1967 and 1970, consumers across the county joined grape strikers by participating in the grape boycott. This was followed by a lettuce boycott in 1970 and a second grape boycott in 1973.

Between 1973 and 1975, a nationwide Louis Harris poll showed that 17 million people were boycotting grapes in the United States.

A man of obviously strong convictions, he undertook three fasts to drive his points home. The first, 1968, was undertaken to rededicate his movement to nonviolence. It lasted for 25 days, and U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy hailed him as a heroic figure. His second fast in 1972 also lasted 25 days and was to protest a law that denied farm workers the right to strike and/or boycott for better working conditions.

At the age of 61, he held his last fast, known as the "Fast for Life," to call attention to the harmful impact of pesticides. He was joined by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Martin Sheen, Edward James Olmos, Kerry Kennedy, Danny Glover and others.

Chavez died in his sleep in the home of a former farm worker and friend near Yuma, Arizona, on April 23, 1993. He was there working with union lawyers, fighting against a lettuce grower who had filed suit against the union. He was 66.

His biographies note that he never earned more than \$6,000 a year, never owned a home, and he left no savings to his family. Instead he left the strong message that "si se puede" (it can be done).

In 1994, his wife, Helen, accepted the Medal of Freedom for her husband from President Bill Clinton, who noted that Chavez "faced formidable, often violent opposition with dignity and nonviolence."

Cesar Chavez was our first national spokesperson who identified with the needs of our community and was able to voice those needs to our community and the larger community," said Félix Gutiérrez, professor of journalism at USC Annenberg School of Communication, who knew and marched with Chavez.

"He reminds us that there are more battles to be fought," adds Gutierrez, "and that there is a need for more Cesar Chavezes."

It is anticipated the retreat center will open at the end of 2006, and the museum and cultural center in 2009. In the meantime, visitors are welcomed to the memorial garden and visitor center.

To make a contribution to the center through the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation, visit <http://www.chavezfoundation.org> and click "Donate." Donations can be made online or by calling the foundation's development director, Stacey Lee, at 818-265-0300.

For more information on the National Chavez Center, call 661-823-6230. The center is located at 29700 Woodford-Tehachappi Rd., Keene, California.