

## The Fight for Food Justice

*“No one should have to feed themselves with food that was produced through the exploitation of humans, innocent creature, or through the poisoning and exploitation of Mother Earth.”* -Rosalinda Guillen

In August 2017, Honesto Silva Ibarra, 28, father of three and a temporary H-2A farmworker at Sarbanand Farms in Sumas, Washington complained of headaches and requested medical attention from his employers. Later, he collapsed on the field while picking blueberries and was transported to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle where he died on August 6th (Ly). Silva's death is disputed as a spokesperson from Sarbanand Farms says he died from complications of diabetes and while farmworkers blame unhealthy conditions created by wildfire smoke and heat (Correia). Like many farmworkers, Silva risks his life working outdoors in the summer without protection from heat and wildfire smoke. In 2010, the CDC reported that farmworkers are 20 times more likely to die from extreme heat than other outdoor workers (Jackson and Rosenberg). “It's a slow death. The cumulative effects of pesticides on our bodies, the poverty, the lack of education, opportunity and access,” says Rosalinda Guillen, a former farmworker and community organizer for labor rights, “We are professional workers like everybody else. We don't deserve charity or pity, we want respect and dignity and the wages that are commensurate with the value that we bring to the employer and the industry.”(Carballo)

Born in Texas, Guillen grew up in Mexico before moving to Washington State and began working on strawberry fields in Skagit county at the age of ten. “Like so many of us who come from a farming tradition, I am a person of the land. I loved picking strawberries. In the fields, you can feel beauty everywhere.” Guillen said (Aguilar).

Guillen hasn't always been an activist. When she was 37 and working as an operations manager for Skagit Bank, a Rainbow Coalition organizer mobilizing support for Rev. Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign knocked on her door. “Before that... I had never registered to vote, had never been involved at all in any kind of activism.” (Walker) The

Rainbow Coalition, founded after Rev. Jackson's 1984 presidential campaign, fought for equal rights for all Americans. Guillen was recruited as a precinct captain and was involved in electoral campaigns for Jesse Jackson. She became increasingly more involved and founded the Whatcom County Rainbow Coalition chapter. Through the Rainbow Coalition, Guillen learned about the United Farm Workers. "I had never heard of Cesar Chavez. I'd never heard of unions. They taught me about that." Guillen says (Walker). In 1993, Guillen started running her first campaign after the Rainbow Coalition was approached by farmworkers from Chateau Ste. Michelle, the largest winery in Washington state, for support of their 6-year boycott. "There was a group of farmworkers that had been enduring sexual assaults and poisonings with pesticides... I was a former farmworker so I was assigned by the Rainbow as a lead on the boycott." Guillen said, adding that she was inspired by the work of Cesar Chavez and the 1965 grape boycott he led (Mease). Kurt Peterson, a Yale fellow who had volunteered to advocate for farm workers in eastern Washington, and Guillen developed the campaign. Over the next 2 years, they gained support from others to boycott Chateau Ste Michelle wines. Marriott Food Services stopped selling the wine on Washington ferries (Haberstroh). The flight attendant union joined the boycott and stopped serving the wines on flights and the winery's dinner train was canceled after organizers planned to block it. The campaign even gained international support. In Europe, international union and longshoremen union workers refused to take the wine off ships. To disrupt the winery from the inside, Peterson and others bought shares of the company so they could attend shareholder meetings to make their voices heard. They would bring farmworkers with them to the otherwise calm meetings causing a scene.

Guillen devoted her weekends and evenings to the boycott. Finally, she quit her job at the bank. After 16 years of working there, she was only four years away from being eligible to retire and a stable financial future. Guillen sacrificed her stable job and retirement to help the farmworker community. Guillen's family was shocked. She and her siblings had struggled to leave farmwork and had all found success. "My sister Angelica is the chair of the English department at Skagit Valley College, one of my brothers is a stock broker, another

one of my brothers owns a cleaning supply store and is a very successful artist, another one owns his own graphics shop and is also a good artist, I have a sister who is a phlebotomist at a medical clinic and runs that whole department, I have a sister who is a police woman. We've done well for ourselves," Guillen says. Despite their response, Guillen had made her decision. " I didn't see any other choice because we had reached a peak with the campaign." Guillen made a second sacrifice by visiting her family less to spend more time on the boycott even when her father, Jesús Guillén, died of cancer. "I saw him maybe twice before he died... It was extremely difficult." She said, but was committed to the campaign, "I couldn't leave the campaign, it was the most critical time." (Walker).

Guillen's courage proved to be valuable. On December 5th, 1995, the campaign secured the first farm-labor union contract ever in the state of Washington. "The contract between Ste. Michelle and the farm workers call[ed] for all vineyard workers to be union members and provide[d] the workers pension and dental plans for the first time, as well as a medical plan and vacations of up to five weeks. In addition, the contract provide[d] for 5.5 percent pay raises for permanent employees in 1996, and 6.5 percent raises for seasonal workers." Under the contract, two paid holidays were added: March 31st, Cesar Chavez's birthday and Good Friday for the majority Catholic workforce.(Bailey)

After the campaign ended, Guillen continued her activism and in 2003, she founded the women and BIPOC-led nonprofit organization, Community to Community Development (C2C), based in Bellingham. C2C connects farmworker communities to bring justice to the US food system. The organization helps new US citizen immigrants register to vote and teaches them how to participate in democracy so their voices can be heard. They supported four local farmworkers in setting up a farm co-op in Whatcom County, Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad (Land and Liberty Cooperative), in 2013. As a co-op, the farmworkers make all the farm operations and management decisions, such as choices on working conditions, earning a livable wage, taking breaks as needed to prevent overworking, reducing their exposure to pesticides, and much more (Paley). This farm represents C2C's goal of food sovereignty which is defined as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced

through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” (C2C)

After the death of Honesto Silva Ibarra, C2C was called to support workers who had been fired for complaining about the working conditions that had killed their fellow worker. Guillen and her team showed up as soon as possible to help. Without jobs, the men had lost their visa status. C2C immediately set up a camp and brought in the support of the community. Doctors and nurses checked the health stats of the workers. People donated money, food, tents, and sleeping bags. C2C educated the community on by holding forums for farmworkers to talk about their experience and organized protests at state agencies (Bauer). While the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries ruled that Sarbanand Farms is not responsible for the death of Silva, every year since then, C2C has held a march to honor him and other farmworkers who have passed away after working in unsafe conditions on the field. (C2C)

Now in her 70s, Guillen is still devoted to the advocacy she started over 30 years ago. In those years, she has helped many of the underrepresented people who provide the valuable labor that brings us the fresh food in our grocery stores. This job doesn't pay a lot but Guillen has shown that she will fight for what she believes. Kerstin Lindgren, a strategic organizing researcher at Service Employees International Union, says, she is struck by Guillen's "sense of justice and her confident determination that we could have an organization that modeled what we wanted our agriculture system to look like—that is, an organization where farmers, farmworkers, businesses, retailers, and other stakeholders all came together equally, through both formal and informal channels." Guillen has strong goals for the future of our food to be healthy for all the people involved from those who plant it to those who eat it. "The ultimate goal is that people be able to eat goodness, your plate of food in front of you is a reflection of what's going on in your community." Guillen says (Bauer). When the food in front of you is sourced from sustainable farming where farmworkers are treated with the care they deserve, you know you are eating good food. And, you can be sure that Rosalinda Guillen helped to make that happen.

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