Excerpts from Mary Lou Mares’s Interview

Q: How did you get started in activism?

A: Well, I was totally one of those people that thought that people with education and people in high authority knew what they were doing and you just let them do what they have to do. But there was a turning point. My husband had been a couple of years working with César Chávez on union stuff, and I kept telling him, “You are going to get hurt, don’t get into it. It’s not even your fight.” He was asked to ‘cause he was very vocal; he’s the one that’s always been vocal, and they asked him to help put in the union into this ranch where he was working. He was working for a number of years just watering the roads, keeping the dust down. At that ranch, yearly, they would plant tomatoes. They would bring in a lot of people to work the tomatoes and they were treated badly: no water, no good pay and all that stuff. He started getting involved and I was working with that same ranch yearly. You sit on a machine and you drop the plants and I — I’m working there because there was two phases of that same company. We would do the planting and then the picking would go on from the first plant, because we would plant twice a year. And, one evening we were working nighttime in August, July, something like that. It was very hot, so they plant at night so that plants get a chance to, you know, grab ahold before the sun hits it. So my sisters and I were going into our job and they always have a guard at the front, and my husband was going in with a union worker and he was ahead of us. He was going to go this way and we were going to go the other way, and all of a sudden, this big old truck comes by and tries to run him off the road, and I said, “What! What are they doing? How dare they do that?” I was so angry and then a man stopped us and says, “You go to your jobs. Get to your jobs.” I was so sick with worry of what was happening on my husband’s side of the ranch. And after that, I said, “Well, do you need a volunteer for this or that?” and I got into it.

And, at the same time, one day we were — we came home and there was this flyer on the door and it was a skull and bones and do you know they are trying to incinerate, something is going to go into the air. So, I went to that meeting. And, the more we heard, the more angry we got that, how dare they, the supervisors of our county just assume that we would go for this project of them placing an incinerator four miles from our town! It was a lot of people, a lot of people that came together to fight for something that’s in common with all of us, our air. You know, we all breathe the same air. What goes around comes around, and it’s everybody’s air. That’s how I got into it. And then, my friend Espi, she’s a very good speaker, but she always pushed me up to the front: “You can do it, come on, you can do it.” I remember at first, I thought I was going to have a heart attack or a stroke, I was so embarrassed; I could feel the color going up in my face as soon as I started talking and then, it got easier and easier and that’s how I got into it, and with a lot of education from people like Bradley Angel, and meeting other groups that had been fighting other stuff around California. You get educated. You think about why are you just quiet and not doing nothing about it, and that’s how I got into it.

Well, like I tell you, my husband was very into any kind of injustice. He was there to speak up and at first, I would think he was just trying to grandstand, but then I saw that
he was really trying to do something to change these injustices and I really saw what he was doing. I mean, this man didn’t speak English and didn’t care if (chuckle) they would try to put him down; he wouldn’t back down, and I thought, “Wow, what a great example for our daughter and for other people of our race!” We’ve always been so submissive. And then, people would come and say, “Oh, you are so great,” and you are this and that, and I didn’t feel great, I just felt that I had to do something.

Q: I am curious if you think that being a woman affected how you got involved at all.

A: I think being a woman was just the way it had to be. The men had to go to work during the day, and most meetings were during the day, 1:00 or 2:00, and they couldn’t take off work every other week or something for some meeting, so we would go in and try to listen to what they were — to understand what they were trying to do to us, and the men would participate in the evening. So, I think it’s just the necessity of women taking part because the men couldn’t do it all the time ’cause they had to feed the family.

Q: What would you say some of the main challenges you faced as you got active were?

A: Understanding what they were talking about in the meetings. Like my husband gives me all these papers — we buy a TV or something — he says, “Tell me what it says.” Well, it’s basically in Chinese to me. They are talking about something mechanical, I don’t understand, and that’s the way they would talk to us at the meetings. Very scientific stuff and then the thing is you’re not allowed to ask questions until they finish the meeting, or “This is not a question-asking meeting, this is just information,” and oh, I “have to come to another meeting to get answers.” They have all these regulations to make you want to give up, get tired of it or whatever, but you have to be persistent. You have to let them know you are there.