Portraits Podcast – *Yes She Did, With Dolores Huerta* (Season 4, Episode 1)

[INTRO MUSIC]

Dolores Huerta: I know it's not easy to make change. And that in the process, you get a lot of push back, a lot of criticism. And you have to put up that shield to say, no matter what you do, you're not going to stop me. You're not going to get in my way. You know, I know what my path is, and I'm gonna continue.

Kim Sajet: Welcome to Portraits. I'm Kim Sajet, the director of the National Portrait Gallery. This season, we're telling stories of resistance and resilience.

Dolores Huerta: When you decide to become a warrior, you can expect that you're going to have a lot of arrows that are going to be slung at you.

Kim Sajet: That's my guest today, the Civil Rights pioneer Dolores Huerta. She has fought her whole life to lift up the people who put food on our table, and she spearheaded one of the most consequential strikes and boycotts in American history. The classic slogan: "Sí, Se Puede", or "yes we can". That's hers. But until recently, her work was overshadowed by Cesar Chavez, the man who co-founded the United Farm Workers with her.

Separate Audio Clip: "No man will stand taller than when you say, I was there. I marched with Caesar"

Kim Sajet: In 2016, we sent some overdue credit to Dolores' way with an exhibition titled: "One Life Dolores Huerta". Some of the images that we discussed today are from that retrospective, and you can find them in the show notes of this episode. Today, we look back with Dolores at some of those arrows that were slung her way from commonplace chauvinism to a police beating that nearly killed her. Through it all, she's never lost sight of the people that she's actually trying to help. And that's where we begin in the 1950s. In her native California, where Dolores was door knocking to register people to vote. She visited one home that made a particularly strong impression.

Dolores Huerta: I came to a home of a farmworker family. There was no covering on the floor, it was a dirt floor. Their furniture was orange crates, and cardboard boxes. The children were barefoot, and obviously malnutrition. So that was a big shock for me. I had known farmworkers. But I had never seen the way that some of them had to live. And that really infuriated me, though, that's when I made my decision to just quit being a teacher and start organizing farmworkers.

Kim Sajet: So, let's start sorting the middle of your story. And perhaps the one that most Americans are most familiar with, which is the Delano grape strike. We have a portrait in the collection that shows you in profile holding a strike sign in English. It says "strike" by the artist George Ballis. And then there's

this other wonderful picture that unfortunately, we don't have in the collection. But it shows you standing up and holding the sign "Huelga". You're wearing a sweater in one case and a scarf in the other, so maybe it's cold. Tell us about the context. What are you doing in these pictures?

Dolores Huerta: Well, the one that has kind of a shawl over my shoulders, it was in the wintertime. And we had to be out there on the picket lines. And we had to get out there very early like four or five o'clock in the morning, because that's when they would bring the strikebreakers to break the strike. So, we had to make sure that we dress up pretty warm, because we would be out on those picket lines from the early morning until the sun went down. We used to call it from sun up to sun down: sol el sol. And so you had this kind of warmth to be out there. So I had this big old sol on my shoulders. Now the first portrait was kind of a classic poetry where I am standing up holding the sign "Huelga" which means strike in Spanish. That picture was taken, I guess about a week into this strike. And I remember I had kind of run out of clean clothes. And I had this one like sweater that was all wrinkled. But it was the only thing that I had that was clean to be able to put on to go out there to the picket line. And I was standing on the car of one of the strikers holding up that sign because there were strikebreakers in the field, and I stood up on top of the car so that they could see me and I remember turning one way or the other as I was conscious of my wrinkled sweater. But now we look at the picture, we know that the wrinkles were actually part of the dramatic effect of the picture.

Kim Sajet: That's fascinating. Now that you mentioned it, I can actually see the wrinkles. I've never noticed that before. But also the perspective, it makes sense that you're standing on a car, which must have been kind of scary in of its own right to stand on a car. But you have the sort of the electric lines, you know, the electric cable lines that are in the sky behind you. It makes for a really dramatic picture. It was at the entrance of our exhibition, and it's by Harvey Wilson Richards.

Dolores Huerta: Yes, that picture has been used so many, many, many times.

Kim Sajet: So, tell us more about the Delano grape strike from 1965 to 1978. Just in a snapshot Dolores, why were you striking?

Dolores Huerta: Well farm workers were being treated so terribly. One of the examples of this is, of course, that the women didn't have bathrooms in the field. And if you can imagine working out there, in the hot sun in the cold of winter, you are miles and miles away from the nearest gas station in the nearest town. And there isn't even a Porta Potty out there. And so, for women, it was so embarrassing, that they had to hide behind sheets. You know, women would gather around each other when they had to do their business. So you had an audience and it was just so humiliating. And of course, for the men also. And at that time, you know, construction workers that they had their Porta Potties out there. And this was just a way to humiliate people. To make them feel that they were less than human. And when I talked to farmers, and we'll talk about all of the other benefits that we want like unemployment insurance, disability insurance, a good workers comp, the right to have a union, they always say to me: "Dolores don't forget the bathrooms". I want to say too that, I use the bathrooms actually as a symbol. In many ways, unless you put something into a law that can be implemented, and forced and where people can be held accountable, then you really didn't quite finish the job. I got bathrooms into my first contract that I signed. And then finally we passed it into a national law. And from the time that I first

signed it into the first contract, the collective bargaining agreement, and to the time that it got passed, it took almost 20 years for it to become a national law.

Kim Sajet: That speaks to the long hole, right, that idea of resilience that you've got to keep at it. And in fact, the Delano grape strike lasted five years. People weren't working, they weren't getting a wage. I mean, that's a long time, Dolores. I imagine that after a couple of months, you're thinking okay. But after a year goes by, and a second year goes by. Tell us about just sort of, people don't realize I think how long these things can last.

Dolores Huerta: Yeah, well, there was a lot of violence. You know, we were shot at, people were beaten. It was very, very ugly. But the thing is that the way that we finally were able to win after months of being on the picket lines, then we started a boycott. At that point in time, they had had the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, then there was an organization called the Congress of Racial Equality. They were doing a boycott of auto dealerships in San Francisco area. So we thought okay, well, let's try it. So our first target for the boycott was a wine company called Schenley. And they also sold liquor. So some of our young volunteers they hitchhiked all the way back to New York City. And we started that boycott on Schenley. And within weeks of the boycott, you know, the company decided that they would sign the contract. And then we boycotted a couple of other wine companies. And so then we were getting all these contracts to the boycott. And then we said, boycott all the grapes. And then we were able to get all of the grape lords to come in and sign contracts.

Kim Sajet: And why grapes Dolores because these are the United Farm Workers. So presumably, they're also picking corn and vegetables and all sorts of produce. Why focus on grapes?

Dolores Huerta: Well, actually, California is the largest producer of grapes in the Central Valley of California. Over 90% of the grapes, fresh grapes that are sold in the United States come from California. And that was the target of our strikes to begin with. And then of course, they have all of the wine grapes, you know, they have the fine wines. So they didn't really want any kind of a boycott, so we found out that if you boycott anything that has alcohol in it, it makes it easier to target.

Kim Sajet: You know, it's so interesting because I think it's so ingenious. If you're boycotting grapes and grapes turn into wine, it really hits people at the sort of the pleasure principle rate. People like to enjoy a glass of wine, they're willing to spend more money on that glass of wine. It very much hits at the middle class and the upper-class too. So, you know, I imagine that had you decided to boycott cabbages, it might have been a very different story right. But grapes are kind of ingenious.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet
In 1970, most of Delano growers agreed to pay harvesters a better wage and to contribute to a union health plan. Dolores and Cesar also successfully campaigned to ban DDT on grape and lettuce farms. But the strikes impact didn't end there. It in fact paved the way for a law that was passed five years later establishing collective bargaining for California farm workers. And that was a first in US history. On the other side of the break, Dolores, the born-again feminist.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: Hi, listeners, I'd like to make a quick pitch for your support. If you enjoy the podcast and you believe as we do that, it's important to draw a fuller picture of our American story, please consider donating online. Your support helps us to bring the hidden stories of remarkable people to life. And any amount that you can give to portraits is so deeply appreciated, you can find out how to contribute at our website at npg.si.edu/donate.

Separate Audio Clip (Dolores): "One of the areas that women can give up a little bit of time is in shopping, okay. And especially when we go out there shopping for things that we don't even need. You know, you never saw a hearse with a U haul behind it. We have to live simply so that others can simply live and when we think of the kind of inheritance that we want to leave to our children or grandchildren, think of leaving them a legacy of justice."

Kim Sajet: That was Dolores Huerta from the TED stage. Dolores has sat across the table from legislators in their chambers and across from landowners in high stakes negotiations. She's won all kinds of benefits for farm workers, such as unemployment insurance, better wages and disability safeguards. But she was often the only woman at that table. And she was actually fighting on two fronts: resisting the exploitation of farm workers and also resisting sexism. She credits Fred Ross senior for introducing her to the brand of grassroots organizing, that has underpinned her life's work. But she doesn't mince her words. She says that sometimes she encountered sexism from within the very labor movement that she helped to launch. For example, Cesar Chavez was the face of the United Farmworkers, not his female counterpart, Dolores. Let's get back to our conversation.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: One of the big reasons that we wanted to do the one life exhibition was to reintroduce to certainly another group of younger Americans. If you had a chance to do this over again, do you think you would be more assertive? Or did that never really play into your mind? The idea of well, you know, what about me? I'm working pretty hard over here.

Dolores Huerta: Well, when we started the organization, actually, Cesar asked me: "Would it be alright with you if I am the spokesperson for the Union?" And myself, I think having been socialized like so many other women, that we're supposed to support men, I said: "Oh, it's okay Cesar" Of course once I met him like everybody else Cesar was a genius and people rallied behind him. And his voice was a very, very humble voice. But now with my feminist lens that were given to me by Gloria Steinem and Eleanor Smeal, I think I would have said to Cesar, "No Cesar, let's do it half and half". But actually, the way that Fred Ross taught us is that as an organizer, your job is to empower other people, not to empower yourself, right?

Kim Sajet: Yes.

Dolores Huerta: And so, you know, having other people be the spokespersons for the organization, for the movement, for the work that we're doing, that that is very natural to me.

Kim Sajet: Yeah, but at the same time seeing women being brought forward inspires other women and men one would hope, to see women in those roles more often. Right, that's the power of portraiture.

Dolores Huerta: No, I absolutely I agree. And within the United Farmworkers, you know, I had to sort of suppress a lot of my feminist thought. I was going into a very, very different culture, working with a lot of farmworkers who were immigrants. So, at some point in the Union itself, I just started to react to the sexism that existed in the organization. And when they would ask Cesar: "why do you have so many women working here", and he would have women in charge of field offices, in charge of arbitrations. And he would say: "because they do the work, right" That was always his answer. But we didn't have enough women on our executive board. And I started really trying to champion to get more women on the board.

Kim Sajet: Dolores also started keeping a tally of sexist comments her colleagues made during board meetings. And at the end of the sessions, when Cesar asked if anyone had anything to add, she'd say, "yes". during the course of this meeting, you guys made 58 sexist remarks. As she told one reporter, she just kept at it until the tally went down to 20, then to ten, and then five and finally stopped.

Dolores Huerta: I'm happy to report that today, the United Farmworkers, the President is a woman and that the majority of the people on the board of the United Farmworkers are women to this day.

Kim Sajet: So, let's talk about your relationship with Gloria Steinem. You credit her with making you a feminist. You know, when asked about this question about your relationship, Gloria Steinem has said that she was in fact, a little frightened of you when she first met you. Why? What was your impression of her? Why was she frightened of you?

Dolores Huerta: Yeah, that really surprised me when I heard that because I was in awe of Gloria. I think we were in awe of each other because she was just such a powerful force. And yet, so humble. I mean, we have farmworkers there in New York City. She called the limo once to take the farmworkers and took them up to a really beautiful restaurant to have a really beautiful dinner. Who does that? You know...

Kim Sajet: Yeah, wow.

Dolores Huerta: And to this day, I am still friends with Gloria and I love her so much.

Kim Sajet: And we have this wonderful photograph in the collection, where she is doing sort of the arm raised, clenched fist above her head; sort of that power gesture of standing and looking directly out of the camera next to Dorothy Pitman Hughes. It's taken by Dan Wyman in 1971. It's really what we call that sort of power gesture of solidarity. Tell us a little bit about Gloria Steinem and her influence on you as an activist and as a feminist.

Dolores Huerta: Well, I thought I was a feminist because I believed in women having power. And women being in charge, like my mother, who raised us and who was always the decision maker in our family. And she raised my brothers to do all the housework like I did. I mean, I never had to serve my brothers, cook for my brothers, or iron for my brothers ever. In fact, my brothers thought I was spoiled because they said the mom did more for me than she did for them.

Kim Sajet: Well, brothers will do that to you.

[LAUGHTER]

Dolores Huerta: My brothers were better cooks than I, so I thought I was a feminist. But again, being a Catholic and being raised with the idea that abortion is a sin. And this is where Gloria, you know, brought me over to the position of choice and respecting other people's rights to believe what they do. And then I was invited to be on the board of the Feminist Majority Foundation with Ellie Smeal. And Ellie then took me the rest of the way to talk about abortion being a woman's right to be able to control her own body. So I thought I was a feminist, but being a feminist is a much more than what I believed at that time.

Kim Sajet: Resistance, however, can be dangerous too. In 1988, Dolores was protesting outside a fundraiser hosted by then, Vice President George Bush Senior, when she was severely beaten by a San Francisco police officer. She suffered broken ribs, a ruptured spleen and serious internal bleeding.

Dolores Huerta: And my injuries were internal, so you literally couldn't see where I was losing the blood from. So it was just a miracle that I was saved. So I was very, very fortunate.

Kim Sajet: Did you ever say, or did others ever say: "Dolores, this is getting a little out of hand because you know, we love you, but is it really worth the cost of your life?"

Dolores Huerta: That thought never entered into my mind? And I guess my focus has always been on making the world a better place and using whatever skills I had to do that. And you know, the one thing that really kind of disappointed me is that some of the men in the organization just assumed that I had done something to bring it on myself.

Kim Sajet: Wow.

Dolores Huerta: Somehow it was my fault that I had gotten beaten. The one thing is, since it was all recorded, they were able to identify the officer. And that actually proved that I was just part of the protest and I was not doing anything irregular or illegal to get that beating. But there were some men in the organization that thought, well, Dolores must have brought it on herself.

Kim Sajet: That must have been extraordinarily hurtful. Other things that you might have done differently? You sort of hinted that a little bit earlier. You said I probably would have stood up for myself a little more; taking the credit that I deserved a little more. Were there other things that you say, you know, if I could have done it again, I might have done it slightly differently?

Dolores Huerta: Well, I think I would have tried to fight more for my children because they were deprived of all of the wonderful things that I experienced as a youngster. The music lessons, the dancing lessons. I guess in exchange that the experiences that they had, most young people would never have that opportunity growing up in the movement, being involved on picket lines, protests, marches and meeting famous people.

Kim Sajet: Dolores' eleven children can say, however, my mom's the one who came up with the rallying cry: "yes, we can" or "sí se puede". It's a motto that was initially and incorrectly attributed to Cesar Chavez. And then it was borrowed by another well-known community organizer.

Separate Audio Clip: "A man touched down on the moon. A wall came down in Berlin. A world was connected by our own science and imagination. Yes, we can"

Dolores Huerta: So we were doing a campaign around Cesar Chavez's fast. He was fasting for 25 days in Arizona (a water only fast) because they had passed a law in Arizona that if a farm worker went on strike, then they could go to prison. If you said boycott anything, you could also go to prison. So we were organizing to try to overturn that law. So as I was organizing some of the professional Latinos they told me and you can't do anything here in Arizona, "no se puede". And so my response to them was "sí se puede". And when I reported that conversation to the rally that we had every night there around seasons fasting, when I said that I told them "sí se puede", people jumped up and they started clapping. Saying "sí se puede", saying "yes, we can". And so that became a rallying cry for that campaign. And of course, as we know, President Obama used it in his campaign for the presidency.

Kim Sajet: Yes, and he mentioned that pretty belatedly. Again, to the point of women often getting recognition way past the time that they should have received it 20 years later. But in 2012, he awarded you the Medal of Freedom.

Separate Audio Clip: "And on a personal note, Dolores was very gracious when I told her I had stolen her slogan. 'Sí se puede' and 'Yes, we can'. Knowing her I'm pleased that she let me off easy because Dolores does not play"

Dolores Huerta: Well, we're still trying to accomplish the dream that the Founders of our Constitution had in the Bill of Rights, and we're not there yet. And the great thing is that when people see that they are making history, they are exhilarated and they are joyful, and they do feel that power. Let me put it this way: we are awakening in people the gift that they have. The gift that they have to make a difference.

Separate Audio Clip: "And it was the Creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation, 'Yes, we can'. It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists, as they paved the trail towards freedom"

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: That was Dolores Huerta going strong at an amazing 92 years of age. But the work still goes on. Today, harvesters not only have to contend with low wages. They are increasingly at risk from heat, stress and even death, as climate change brings record high temperatures to the fields where they work. You can see the images we discussed and other historic photographs are Dolores in the show notes of this podcast, or on our website at npg.si.edu/podcasts. This episode was produced by Ruth Morris. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanon, Deborah Sisum, Rebecca Ortiz-Hernandez and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Joe Kye and Breakmaster Cylinder. Our engineer is Tarek Fouda. And it was Will.i.am who put Obama's campaign speech to music. Until next time, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.