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Chautauqua audience gets glimpse into César Chávez's legacy

On Thursday, one of the leaders of the Latino civil rights movement came to Greeley.

César Chávez, aka Fred Blanco, spoke on Friday at the High Plains Chautauqua, which took place at Aims Community College.

Chávez was a vocal leader of the Latino civil rights movement and also created the United Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers of America. On Friday, he spoke with The Tribune about his life and mission.

Tribune: Could you describe your time as a migrant worker? I heard you attended upward of 30 elementary and middle schools.

Chávez: The number has gotten diluted over the years but about 35 or maybe 40. So many schools when I was growing up. I'm from Yuma, Ariz., but after the Depression, had lost everything. So we moved to where the work was, like everyone else.

So though we were poor when I was growing up, we were never destitute. So the life of a migrant worker was new to us. As little kids we had never known anything like that before, so we got to see what it was like to move around and never really own your own property.

Tribune: Any specific memories of when you were moving from school to school and farm to farm?

Chávez: The thing that sticks out in my head the most is school. Because, though I learned to love education, I hated to go to school because there was so much discrimination in the schools and there was a lot of indifference in the schools. And it was that way throughout the United States, but they were very strict about us being able to speak our native language.

In class there was a strict rule that if we spoke Spanish, we would get hit on the knuckles very severely. But they also had this thing with a sign that they would hang on you — tie a string to this little sign and they would hang it from your neck — and they would say something to embarrass you so you would never do it again. For me, I remember very vividly “I am a clown, I speak Spanish.”

So something like that sticks with you and that was probably one of the earliest memories that I have that stuck with me that motivated me to try to make a change.

Tribune: How did that affect you later in life?

Chávez: I didn't want that to happen anymore. I didn't feel that it served any purpose. All it served was to make me feel bad about myself. It was just something that was humiliating and that's not how you teach a child.

There were things like that everywhere. You would go to stores, and you would see different signs that were

TODAY AT CHAUTAUQUA
 Adult programs
 Where: Ed Beaty Hall Black Box Theatre
 Aims Community College
 5401 W. 20th St., Greeley
 Details: Secrets of the Writer by Brian Gordon Sinclair, 9:30-10:30 a.m.; Competing Visions of America, Doug Mishler as Theodore Roosevelt, Bill Young as Woodrow Wilson, 10:45-11:45 a.m.; “Everybody's Doin' It Now,” Ragtime Dance Lesson, instruction by Susan Marie Frontczak, 1-2 p.m.; Spirit of Adventure and a Heart of Courage, Elsa Wolff as Amelia Earhart, 2:15-3:15 p.m.
 Evening programs
 Where: The Big Tent, Aims Community College, 5401 20th St., Greeley
 Details: Eleanor Roosevelt (by Susan Marie Frontczak), Martin Luther King, Jr. (played by Bill Grimmette), 7-9 p.m.
 Go to highplainschautauqua.org

forbidding people of certain colors to come into a place of business.

So when I was a little boy, and I don't remember exactly how old I was, but I was with my brother and we went into a ... shop. I wanted a hamburger – I was hungry and I didn't really know better but everybody knew you couldn't go into certain stores. And I ordered a cheeseburger at the counter and the waitress laughed at me, and she said "I'm not going to serve to a damn Mex. So get out."

And that stuck with me, too. And I cried a bit because I didn't understand, and even if I did understand, it hurt. But when I speak to a lot of people now, a lot of people are surprised to hear things like that happened in California. They always have that notion that it only happened in the deep South, but really, it happened everywhere.

Tribune: How did you see race relations progress between Anglos and Latinos? Did you see it really progress?

Chávez: It can always be improved upon but you see the transformation, and it's very encouraging. But you would like to live in a world where that never existed. That's the ideal – that's what we strive for.

Tribune: During your life you would often fast. What was the purpose behind that? What were you hoping people would take from that?

Chávez: Well, initially it was for myself. Initially it was so I could find my spiritual center and the very first one I did was during a real turbulent time during the union movement and just in U.S. history there was a lot of turbulence going on. With Vietnam, and you had the civil rights movement where people were getting killed – the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr.

So the United States was like this pressure cooker and people wanted to fight back and you can't really blame them, right? So in the movement I really impressed upon people how important it was for us to stay non-violent, but there comes a point where you don't want to anymore.

So by my sacrificing myself and creating a weakness in myself, it gave them strength because it rallies everybody together around this one person.

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