

Cultural Connection Biographies

César Estrada Chávez (Mexican American)

César Estrada Chávez was dedicated to serving humanity by improving the working conditions of migrant farm workers in America and civil rights for everyone. Like his contemporary, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chávez used nonviolent reform, such as pickets, boycotts, and peaceful demonstrations.

Chávez's dedication to civil rights grew out of his early experiences with discrimination. Though he spoke only Spanish at home, he was not allowed to speak Spanish at school, where minority students were treated like outsiders. Chávez did not attend high school because he quit school to help support his family when his father had an accident. His family lost their land when someone deliberately gave Chávez's father bad advice and then took the land and sold it for a profit.

After serving in the Navy during World War II, Chávez returned to California where he married Helen Fabela. Eventually, César and Helen Chávez had eight children together.

Due to the injustices that Chávez faced as a child and young adult, he became passionate about improving the way of life for farm workers and for his people. In 1952, Chávez started working for the Community Service Organization as an advocate for the civil rights of Latinos. In 1962, Chávez founded the United Farm Workers (UFW). His goal was to promote the racial equality and dignity of farm workers. Farm work was poorly paid and dangerous. The migrants worked long hours and moved often to follow the work. Often, men, women, and children worked in the fields to ensure the survival of the family. Because they feared losing their jobs, migrant workers did not dare to stand up for their rights.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Chávez led many boycotts against grape growers. During 1967-70, the grape boycott became an international demonstration with people in many countries refusing to purchase grapes as a sign of support for the UFW. Like his role model Ghandi, Chávez also used fasting as a peaceful reform tactic.

In 1988, Chávez investigated the effects of pesticides on the health of the farm workers and their children who came to the fields because families could not afford childcare. Chávez fasted for 36 days in what was called the Fast for Life. Numerous influential people and celebrities participated, including Reverend Jesse Jackson. The Fast drew attention to the effects of harmful pesticides on consumers.

The UFW and Chávez had many accomplishments - establishing minimum wage standards, wage contracts, safer working conditions, child labor reform, and advancement in civil rights for Mexican Americans and other farm workers. Chávez remained active in the fight for justice and civil rights his entire life. He died on April 23, 1993.

Excerpted from Learning to Give Briefing Paper, "Cesar Chavez"
<http://learningtogive.org/papers/paper84.html>

Abdul Sattar Edhi (Pakistani/Muslim)

Abdul Sattar Edhi is to the poor of Pakistan as Mother Teresa was to the poor of India. He has devoted his life to serving the poor, while maintaining a private and humble life. As a social worker dedicated to helping the poor of Pakistan, he established his first clinic in 1951. Now the Edhi foundation is the largest welfare agency in Pakistan.

The Edhi foundation has over 300 centers in big and small cities and towns. The centers provide medical help, family planning, and emergency services. Edhi and his wife, Bilques, are not highly educated, but they have devoted their life and resources to the poor of Pakistan.

Edhi was raised in the hardworking Memon community, a Sunni Muslim group. As a child, his mother taught him to be kind to others. He reports that she gave him two coins for lunch at school: one to buy his lunch, and one to buy the lunch of someone in need. As a young man, Edhi worked as a social worker at a time when Pakistan was going through a difficult separation from India. He soon started his own clinic so he could provide medical help for the poor who were not getting the aid they needed. In the early days, he had a van that served as an ambulance for the poor. His van became known for its work, and people started giving donations to support his work. Soon he hired nurses and other staff. He met his wife when he hired her as a nurse in those days.

Even though his foundation has been very successful, Edhi continues to live a humble life. He lives in a two-room home, wakes up early, wears simple clothes, and gives personal attention to the people he helps. He travels to the different centers, eats the same meals he serves to the poor, and personally bathes the physically handicapped children.

The Edhi foundation has air ambulances, so they can reach remote locations where there is a fire or other catastrophe. There are more than 3,500 employees and thousands more volunteers working for Edhi. The Edhi Foundation claims the following facts: "20,000 abandoned babies saved, 40,000 nurses trained, and 50,000 orphans housed in Edhi homes, 1,000,000 babies delivered in Edhi Maternity Centers." (Edhi Foundation)

Because the government and religious organizations set "conditions," Edhi does not take donations from them. He is dedicated to helping people with humanity and love.

George Washington Carver (African American)

George Washington Carver was dedicated to lifelong learning and the practical application of the sciences. Carver made many contributions to this world and the environment, especially related to agriculture.

George Washington Carver was born into slavery during the Civil War and grew up on a plantation. He left home early to find schools that would educate African Americans. Carver was the first African American man to study at Iowa State University, earning a Bachelor of Science in 1894. After teaching and graduating with a master's degree in 1896, Carver took a job as head of the agricultural department at Tuskegee Institute. The school did not have the financial resources necessary, but Carver used available materials to create a makeshift lab. His passion encouraged his students to excel despite the odds. He served for forty-seven years at Tuskegee Institute, although he had many more-profitable offers, including from Thomas Edison and Booker T. Washington. His achievements at Tuskegee helped many minority people gain respect in the fields of science and technology.

Carver made a significant impact on how to utilize the gifts of the earth without depleting its resources. His contributions to science and southern farmers were extensive. He developed over 300 commercial applications for peanuts and 118 uses for sweet potatoes in order to help farmers increase their profits. His technique of rotating crops was beneficial for soil conservation in the South and across the nation and world.

George Washington Carver began the Farmers Institute in order to share his knowledge about sustainable farming with Southern farmers. He reached day laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers through his movable school on wheels, his "Tuskegee Wagon."

Carver gave hope to the next generation of farmers, and he strived to help his students to view the world as one. Carver's explicit desire was to serve and uplift his people. He declined lucrative career opportunities with other institutions to keep his commitment of sharing knowledge with farmers and food consumers around the world.

Shortly before his death in 1943, Carver donated his entire savings to the institute to start the Carver Research Foundation for research in agriculture. His gravestone reads, "He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world."

Excerpted from Learning to Give Briefing Paper, "George Washington Carver"
<http://learningtogive.org/papers/paper83.html>

Sunderlal Bahuguna (Indian/Hindu)

Sunderlal Bahuguna is an eco-activist from India who works through nonviolence to address ecological problems. Sunderlal has spent his life protesting against the ecological destruction by the government, educating Indian villagers, and protecting the Himalayan Mountains. Mr. Bahuguna took an active role within the Chipko and anti-Tehri Dam movements.

Sunderlal Bahuguna was born in 1927 to an affluent family in a Himalayan village. Despite his family's wealth, Sunderlal watched his mother struggle under the burden of "women's work" from early morning to late night every day. He once heard her pray for death when she was tired. This motivated Sunderlal to work toward easing the burden of Indian women.

When Sunderlal was only thirteen years old he began a political career. Sunderlal learned how to create change through nonviolent means from his guru. Following his marriage to wife, Vimla, Sunderlal retired from public life and moved back to a village within the Himalayas.

By 1960 Sunderlal could no longer ignore the devastation around him. First, Sunderlal helped the mountain women to eradicate alcohol from the lives of mountain people.

Then, Sunderlal and the women of the mountains turned their energy to stopping the deforestation of the Himalaya Mountains. The British government and then the Indian government came into the Himalayan Mountains and began clear-cutting the forests. The ecological effect was devastating for the mountaineers. Sunderlal worked with others to ignite the Chipko movement. Chipko literally means tree huggers. Sunderlal and the local women would chain themselves to the trees so that the loggers could not cut the trees down.

Sunderlal is most famous for his work to stop the creation of the Tehri Dam. This Dam diverts the flow of the Ganges River away from the Himalayan Mountain villages so the people there no longer have easy access to clean water. To show his opposition to the dam, Sunderlal has petitioned the government and gone on hunger strikes to show his unfailing commitment to stopping the Tehri Dam Project.

Sunderlal's outspoken views have ignited the young people of India into action to protest against the ecological ruin imposed on India. He will be most remembered in history for igniting a grassroots movement for protecting the environment.

Sunderlal has given his time and talent freely to work for the good of India. He has been the catalyst of change, encouraging thousands of people to work without pay for the good of India's people and ecology.

Excerpted from Learning to Give Briefing Paper, "Sunderlal Bahuguna"
<http://learningtogive.org/papers/paper280.html>