

## A Tribute to Shelley Davis

A Celebration of Life, A Commitment to Keep Fighting for Farmworker Justice

By Jay Feldman

We celebrate Shelley's life, a life that urges us on—to fight with strength of character, good will, unrelenting passion and straight talk, like Shelley did. What an amazing person. What an honor to know her. She inspired us, and she called us to action. In Shelley's view, there was not a lot of time to celebrate the past, rest on our laurels, only enough time to fight for future success.

In accepting Beyond Pesticides' Dragonfly Award for her "tireless dedication advancing knowledge and action," Shelley looked forward. "It is my great pleasure to accept this award on behalf of the farmworkers I represent, not because of any great accomplishments of the past, but as a commitment to fight this fight until we succeed." More than anything, Shelley wants us to keep up the fight and raise our voices. Shelley was a board member of Beyond Pesticides beginning in 1998. And Shelley did have great accomplishments in fighting for farmworker protection through the courts and in support of campaigns to establish standards.

Shelley, quoted in an article in *The Nation* on farmworker poisoning, reminds us of the harsh reality. She said, "Despite the fact that farmworkers do extremely hard work and conduct utterly essential tasks, they are the most ignored, exploited and vulnerable population in this country. Their health needs are entirely subordinated by the government's need to make money for big companies. When you compare the political power of industry with the power of farmworkers, there's no contest."

Shelley believed deeply in society's moral imperative to protect

and support those less fortunate, whose civil and workplace rights have been trampled, who suffer disproportionate adverse health and economic impact. So when Shelley began working as an advocate for migrant and seasonal farmworkers more than 25 years ago, she found her life's passion. As co-director and then deputy director of Farmworker Justice, Shelley was a constant voice for farmworker justice.

When Shelley arrived in Washington, DC to join the staff of Migrant Legal Action Program in the early 1990's, she became an immediate friend of Beyond Pesticides. She believed that the greatest injustice for farmworkers and their children is their poisoning and the poisoning of their families by pesticides. She pointed out, in accepting the Dragonfly Award that, "In 1989, Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, went on a hunger strike, not to demand better wages, although those were needed, but to demand that five pesticides be eliminated from grape orchards and the agricultural workplace in general."

Arturo Rodriguez, president of the UFW, wrote, "The Farmworker Movement is deeply saddened to learn of Shelley's failing health. Shelley has been a fighter all her life. Throughout her career, she had provided key guidance and leadership in demanding EPA and other agencies fulfill their respective missions in protecting farmworkers. She repeatedly identified ways in which we and other organizations that fight for farmworker rights around the country could get our voices heard, be it by joining conference calls with key agency personal, attending meetings, or even suing the agency and denouncing their failures in the media. She is driven by an intense desire to ensure that the people who harvest the food we eat not be forced to sacrifice their health in the process. Today we stand with Shelley in her fight. Her light will not be extinguished, but will live on in our continued struggle to ensure that one day in the near future her vision will become reality. Shelley, we love you and are with you."

In Shelley's words, "We owe it to farmworkers and their families today, and the memory of Cesar Chavez, to change the law and change the reality on the ground—that that on one has to work in an environment where they risk neurological damage, cancer, or birth defects when they go to work each day. As activists, we can make a difference!

*(We would like to thank Shelley's husband and son, Tom and Nicky Smith, for their generous gift to Beyond Pesticides in Shelley's honor.)*

*Jay Feldman is executive director of Beyond Pesticides.*



Shelley at Migrant Clinicians Summit, photo by Amy Liebman.