

PAUL BANKE AND PAUL ZANON



Staying  
Positive

THE STORY OF 'THE REAL'  
PAUL BANKE

FOREWORD BY RAY MANCINI

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CHAPTER 1

**PAUL ANDRE BANKE**

*'You've got to be born with a love of people  
and a hatred for injustice if you want to be a  
union organizer – and a lack of sense about  
when to keep your mouth shut'*

Yolanda Miranda, *Los Angeles View*

**C**HICANO. Where I grew up. That's what they called Mexican-Americans. This Chicano was born at 4.30am on 1 March 1964 in Blythe, California, Riverside County.

I was delivered prematurely at seven months, weighing five pounds, and was only 13 inches in length. Being born premature didn't matter, though, because I was a healthy baby with a tremendous appetite. My mom never had me on a feeding schedule. Whenever I cried, she fed me and I went from five to eight pounds in six weeks.

Banke. It's not the name you associate with a Mexican-American, but there's a good explanation for that. It's not

from Mexico or America! My great-grandfather on my dad's side was a sheep herder from San Sebastián, which is on the border of Spain and France in Europe, in the Basque country. He then came over to the United States and met my great-grandmother, and married her. The last name, Banke, is pronounced 'Baaan-kay' back in Europe, but 'Ban-key' over here. Either way, the Banke name isn't what raised me, my two brothers Steve and Tim and sister Rebecca. My dad left soon after I was born and I only saw him a handful of times right the way up to adulthood. The person who raised us was a lady by the name of Yolanda Miranda. Mom.

My mom's family also had a lot of history to it. She has Native American blood from Arizona and her grandparents from her mom's side were Yaqui. That means I have Basque, Mexican, Yaqui and US heritage. All of that crammed into me. That's a lot of cultures!

My mom came from a very poor migrant farmworker family in the United States. They had money but they were never financially free of poverty and that's something she didn't want us to experience when we became adults. Mom was one of 14. Seven girls and seven boys, and had more cousins than I could name. They didn't have what you'd call a fixed home because they followed the crops, something me and my brothers and sister would also grow up doing as kids. It was a way of life for us and still is for many.

At that time, mom and her brothers and sisters were child labor. Not because her parents wanted to but because it took all of them to get the work completed in the fields

when crop-picking seasons were in. During the winter, the weather situation prevented them from working in the fields, so her papa and mama would rent a house and stay there until spring, at which time they could start working again. My mom always said, 'We were financially very poor, but traditionally, very rich in culture and language.' When they did work, they lived in camps that the owners of the farms and governments provided for migrant farm workers. Not the best, but they were sheltered and had wooden floors, with bathrooms outside and so forth.

Mom had a brother, Billy, who did amazing things campaigning with labor leader and civil rights activist Cesar Chavez who, alongside Dolores Huerta, co-founded the National Farm Workers Association. Unfortunately, Billy was murdered at the age of 22. This didn't stop mom's passion for the cause, though.

Chavez was a big name amongst Mexican-Americans. Back in the day, there were posters by Chavez that said, 'Cherish your heritage. The harvest is great.' Chavez and Billy built up a good friendship and between her brother's work alongside Chavez and him dying young, that inspired her to take everything to the next level in terms of continuing the work he was doing. She used to tell us, 'Cesar taught me the importance of having hopes and dreams. Without them, you can't overcome your fears and stand up for your rights on the job.' Wise words.

Due to being a product of those fields, her culture and the area she was raised in, mom became very passionate about

the working conditions of her fellow migrants and became a union worker fighting hard for the rights of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. She started off by helping to organize farm workers and then started working for the union. That was a calling for her. With her experience, in the coming years she started working with other unions also, including construction workers, registered nurses, pre-school teachers and newspaper workers.

She went on to write a number of articles for magazines and newspapers about the movement, and is still very passionate about it to this very day. Sometimes though, that passion has got her in trouble. Once, while leafleting on one of her rallies, some guy in a van intentionally hit her. When she realized she wasn't badly hurt, she picked herself up and chased the van down the street as everyone started cheering.

But back then, as a result of the campaigning, we were constantly on the move as a family. We were raised by her ways of dealing with life. Where she went, we went. We moved all over California, sometimes for very short periods of time, moving as far north as Santa Rosa in Sonoma County. One year in one place, three years in another, one year somewhere else.

Northern California was full of farm workers, which meant my mom was constantly involved in her union stuff. If she went to a picket line or a boycott, we went and when she had vacation time – well, let's just say it wasn't a traditional vacation. Then in the summertime we'd travel,



because that's when the crops were out, which meant the union workers were out. We just tagged along.

My mom used to pick grapes in the San Joaquin Valley in Fresno, California when she was a kid and during our vacation time she'd take us to vineyards because she wanted to show us how hard it was to be a farm worker. Everything from how to use the land correctly to putting barbecues in the ground. She wanted to show that if we didn't go to school and learn, no matter how hard we worked in those fields, the pay was always going to be low. She wanted us to realize we had a chance to make a difference in our own lives by studying.

Her brother, who passed away, had showed the difference he had made with the movement and she also had a cousin who used to work with her in the farmer days, who decided to leave the fields and try to become something in the world of entertainment. He succeeded. His name is Luis Valdez. He's a famous playwright and founded El Teatro Campesino. He did a lot of plays about the culture of farm workers and his other brother, Daniel, was a songwriter, composer and actor who was musical director for *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba*. They both became successful in Hollywood. The latest thing he's been a part of was playing the voice of Tío Berto in the film *Coco*.

Back to those vineyards. I remember picking grapes as a little kid and kept saying to my mom, 'When we gonna eat? Why we doing this? Why? Why?' You could complain as much as you wanted, but she was very strict about making

sure we went on vacation to those fields to work. Looking back, it certainly made us appreciate a lot about what we had and how much more we could get out of life if we tried.

However, we also realized that being preached to about working hard wasn't always practised by the preachers! One time, I remember picking grapes in the 1970s. I was about 11 years old. There was me, Steve, mom, my uncles and a few others. As me and Steve were picking grapes like crazy, we turned and saw the rest of them taking a long break, smoking weed. Then someone called, 'Lunch'. All the Mexicans just stopped in the fields and had their food. I remember being tired after working real hard and two of my two uncles were sitting on their asses, smoking weed and laughing. I looked at Steve thinking, 'They ain't doin' no work! That's bullshit!'

Despite being poor, I don't remember starving at any point and when you have an appetite like mine, trust me, that's something you wouldn't forget. However, I knew we were poor and living just above the broke line. I learned how to cook and wash my clothes when I was young, not because mom wasn't always there, but because that was the way she'd brought us up. I didn't cook anything fancy. Things like eggs or potatoes, basic food to survive.

We had a stable home, TV, clothes, went to school and did all the normal things a kid did. I became very proud of what we had and the houses we rented. My mom still laughs now when she remembers what I was like back then. If she had to work and we had to stay home after school, I was like

a butler. I cleaned the kitchen and Steve did the washing. Then, when she would come from work and start dinner, I would be there right after her saying, 'Pick that up. Wipe that down.' I'd want the kitchen spotless.

Outside of the house, I loved making rock gardens, exploring and had a big fascination with animals. Birds, fishing, cats, dogs, you name it. But that exploring tendency did get me into trouble on a few occasions. The first episode I don't remember that well, but I was fascinated to try what the mice were being fed. It turns out rat poison ain't so good for you. When my brother found me covered in powder all around my mouth and down my front, my mom took me straight to hospital to get my stomach pumped. I was only three at the time.

By the age of five, I raised the bar. Me and my brother Steve were at a friend's house and there was an old barn that we used to play in, as you do when you're kids. To get back to our place from the barn, we had to climb a steel fence that was barbed at the top. There was a tree next to it and we used to climb the tree and the fence at the same time to get over. But on this occasion, I slipped and cut my arm real bad. The blood was literally flowing. Off we went to the emergency room again. I've still got the scar on my arm. That was the first serious injury I had and the first time I ended up having stiches, although it wouldn't be the last.

If there's one thing me and Steve were good at as kids, it was being resourceful. When mom was organizing for the union back in the day and you had a group of people

together, there was always the opportunity for a little hustle to make some money. We used to buy watermelons, slice them up and start selling them to the people. Especially when it was hot, you couldn't sell those slices quick enough.

Food wasn't our only money-making idea, though. There was this carpet store and we used to go through the garbage, finding bits and pieces. Back then, a lot of the farmers didn't have a good standard of living and lived in real shabby places, so we took the offcuts of carpet and started selling them. Some of them were already cut and sometimes we'd cut them to the size they wanted, but either way, we made some cash. The only thing we didn't do was reinvest the money. Once we had it, we spent it on ice cream. Similar to what I'd do in the future with my earnings, but unfortunately it wasn't ice cream that I was spending it on.